Éva Patkó

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Preface

This book is dedicated to students interested in theater and to fellow colleagues around the world from whom I've gotten so much inspiration.

Theater has the gift of creating new worlds, new languages on stage. My belief is that we must continue creating visionary worlds, universes that could not exist anywhere else but on stage. This is indeed a privilege, to dream of other realities than our own, realities that reflect – with the help of the spectator – on how our present realities are impoverished by a lack of imagination. Artistic activity is a reflection on reality, the process of thinking about reality and not merely an intellectualization of it. The spectator comes up with their own understanding and interpretation by employing their personal imagination and life experiences to relate to what is seen on stage. In the process of understanding theater it is more important to explore than to understand. The goal shouldn't be for the viewer to completely comprehend everything, but, rather, for the audience to probe the theatrical universe in front of them and to enter into dialogue with the performance's language and form. According to Hans-Thies Lehmann, theatrical form (especially of the postdramatic variety) is marked by multiple hiatuses – breaks, lacunae, or gaps – that spectators actively work to fill with the imagination. This collaborative discourse between the spectator and the theater's "openings" of signification was named by Lehmann as the *theater of lack.*[1]

[1] Lehmann presented his theories during an international workshop and seminar for young artists held at Kortárs Dráma Fesztivál KDF Budapest, Hungary in Nov. 26. - Dec. 3. 2007. The references to Lehmann 2007 are written based on the lectures professor Lehman gave during the English language seminar where the author of this book participated.

In his masterwork, *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook writes about the liberating work that the actor needs to complete in every rehearsal process, every performance, and every role. (Brook 1996) Without a constant re-invention of the self, of the identity, theater work is only a barren waste of energy. If the actor fails to liberate themselves from the confines of the self, the only result will be a deadened and deadly theater. Professor Cojar says the same thing in a short sentence about the art and calling of the actor: faith is the road towards essence (Cojar 2006). In the art of theater, in the work of both the actor and the director, essence is about the search for identity. Professor Béres considers that the creative artist is always creating an emergent and unique world of values which was nonexistent until that moment, and that this new reality begins to circulate through human existence via the actor's performance. (Béres 2000) This ephemeral, here-and-now characteristic of theater is the cradle of new identities that appear and disappear both within and beyond theatrical performance.

Questioning the functional structures of society is an omnipresent theme since the two world conflagrations have shaken our continents and wars keep us thirsting for peace. It is not only in politics (leadership structures, female under-representation, minority representation, etc.) and in daily life (sustainable living, ecological footprint, diversification of family models, etc.) that we experience the need to change structures; this need for social transformation is being mirrored in the arts.

Today's theater already questions traditional structures: the hierarchical operational customs and the behavioral patterns connected to it, the power position of the omnipotent theater director, the pedagogical role of theater etc. Four basic questions are always asked again whenever we are making theater: ***why*** are we doing it, ***what*** do we want to communicate, ***how*** do we want to communicate, and, especially, for ***whom*** are we creating the work?

Let's start with the "what" question. What do we intend to present on stage, or in any space where we make theater? Whatever we present expresses our mindset, our artistic approach to the subjects, themes, or problems we want to explore with the audience. Directing is no mere technical exercise in effectively "setting the scene," but is a communicative practice that shapes and conditions how meaning is generated via the theatrical medium. As Patrice Pavis so keenly notes, the *metteur en scene* (the task of "putting on stage") is different from directing, not only etymologically and in terms of their distinction in theater history and theory, but also when looking at the concrete demands of their respective tasks. (Pavis 1998)[2] In my mother tongue, "metteur" or "putting" could be translated as "to make something stand on its feet" or even "to make it work on the stage". When taken in this more metaphorical sense, the phrase *metteur en scene* is neither derogatory nor opposed to the work of directing but, on the contrary, offers me freedom to contemplate how I can make my theatrical ideas stand up on their own two feet on today's stage.

Contemporary authors from Romania have continuously impacted my work. Their writing and theatrical sensibilities inspire new collaborations, projects, and performances.

[2] "It is difficult to make a definitive statement about how appropriate and important the director is in theater creation for, in the last analysis, the arguments always come down to a question of taste and ideology, and not an objective aesthetic debate. We will simply say that the director exists and makes his presence felt (particularly when he is not equal to the task) in the stage production. During the 19605 and 19705 the director was challenged periodically by his „colleagues" - actors feeling hemmed in by overly - tyrannical instructions, stage designers wishing to catch the artistic team and the audience in the trap of their machinery, „collectives" rejecting any distinctions within the group and proposing a collective creation and, most recently, cultural animators acting as an intermediary between art and its marketing, between artists and city - an uncomfortable position, perhaps, but a strategic one." (Pavis 1998, 104-105)

I have directed and/or translated (or helped produce) texts from each of the authors presented below. As I explore their dramatic universes, I will attempt to discuss the theatrical and social interests of contemporary Romanian playwrights. These plays, written in either Romanian and Hungarian, tell us about the way we think about theater here in Central-Eastern Europe: what we communicate with our theater and how we try to deal with the historical past that has imprinted itself upon the culture of this region.

Throughout these chapters, I have inserted exercises that I recommend for theater students and professional actors. These exercises incorporate insights gained from years of directing and my last ten years of teaching at universities in Europe and the US. They are also an acknowledgement of the wisdom gleaned from my encounters with fellow artists, teachers, and students from so many different countries. From Berkeley, CA to Chicago, IL to Zürich, Switzerland and Alexandria, Egypt, the diverse local and global cultures of these places have not only impacted my way of thinking and perceiving the world around me but have shaped my personal approach to theater-making. And, of course, the common goal of making theater together has enriched my appreciation of cultural difference, as well as my search for genuine theatrical languages understood by all involved.

Chapter 1

The Need for Change in Contemporary Romanian Dramaturgy[3]

Critical thinking and a critical spirit are among the most important characteristics of contemporary Romanian plays. They tend to invoke rebellious perspectives in a hierarchical society, demand structural change, and tackle challenging, often taboo subjects. Drawing on my experience as a director and translator, I will present the dramas of Gianina Cărbunariu, Bogdan Georgescu, Ioana Hogman, Mihaela Michailov, Alina Nelega, Peca Ștefan, Elise Wilk, and the Transylvanian-born Thomas Perle.

The multi-ethnic nature of Romanian culture, especially in Transylvania where still three or four languages are actively spoken, creates a unique amalgam of interferences and dialogues between the specific cultures. Hungarian theater is very much impacted by Romanian theater, and Romanian customs and architecture have been much influenced by Germanic and Hungarian culture. Hungarian gastronomy has taken on several Jewish specialties and so on. Over centuries, overlapping ethnic differences have engendered a very specific sense of what it means to live together. The need for integration and tolerance are always counterbalanced by an often contentious need to preserve the specificity of cultural heritages and to highlight their differences. Thus, Romanian culture is constantly pulled toward two magnetic poles:

[3] The shorter version of this subchapter was first published in Hungarian language with the title: *Változni és változtatni. Romániai kortárs drámaírók (To Change and to Want to Change. Romanian Contemporary Dramaturgs.)* in Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Irodalomtudományi Bizottságának Lektorált Folyóirata, *Filológiai Közlöny* LXVII, 2021/2. ISSN 0015-1785. The volume was edited by Magdolna Jákfalvi.

cultural isolation and mutual exclusivity on one end; openness and acceptance on the other.

Many of the playwrights are also theater-makers, mostly staging their own texts (Cărbunariu, Georgescu, Nelega, Stănescu), or even stepping in for a role (Peca). In these cases, the text is rarely, if ever, staged by another director after its premiere. Cărbunariu's plays have had successful premieres and long runs by both independent theater companies and in institutionalized theaters. And while they have not been performed elsewhere in Romanian and are still not collected in a Romanian-language volume, their translations have been performed throughout Europe.[4] It's worth noting that after the fall of the communist regime, more and more plays have been written by women like Cărbunariu, which has undoubtedly enriched the themes and issues treated in Romania's contemporary dramatic literature. Perle, although first published in German, presents the crucible of Transylvanian identity, forged by the hardships of resettlement and emigration experienced by many families from different ethnicities – German, Hungarian, Jewish, Romanian etc. Saviana Stănescu, who has emigrated to New York, writes in English but organizes her plays around Romanian and Eastern European migration themes. Therefore, I present both Perle and Stănescu as Romanian playwrights. The prospects of a Romanian playwright are determined by a number of cultural and institutional factors that are unique to the Romanian way of doing things. Given that most of these authors have worked their way through formal theater training programs in the Romanian university system, it's important to understand their shared educational background, which I will discuss below. Of course, educational systems also serve as methods of inculturation which tend to

[4] Cărbunariu's *Stop the Tempo*, *Kebab*, and *Tiger* have already been performed in English, German, French, Swedish, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Serbian, Bulgarian, Greek, Turkish, Portuguese, Japanese, Danish and Hungarian.

naturalize and reproduce industry norms, which emerging playwrights may either internalize, reform, or circumvent altogether. I will therefore discuss how these playwrights have navigated Romania's professional landscape.

1.1. Training Playwrights

The accredited Romanian- and Hungarian-language degree in playwriting at the University of Arts in Târgu-Mureș launched in 2009, when Master's degrees in playwriting first began to be conferred in Romanian higher education. One of the big advantages of having bilingual departments in parallel – Romanian and Hungarian – is that whenever one department has the means to initiate a new program or course of study, it can instantly pass this knowledge to the other department, so the courses developed by each department can be adapted and integrated into the other. This is one of the main reasons why the University of Arts in Târgu-Mureș could exponentially expand their educational offerings, initiate joint projects, and participate in the international development of different theater disciplines. The Romanian-language playwriting program is directed by Alina Nelega and the Hungarian-language program is coordinated by two professors, Albert Mária and Kárpáti Péter. Fellow faculty of the joint-language program include Kiss Csaba, Hatházi András, Horváth Péter Hungarian playwrights.

In playwriting concentrations, the theater studies curricula in Romanian theater universities may also offer a variety of courses in related theatrical disciplines. At the Faculty of Theatre and Film Studies of the Babeș-Bolyai University, a degree in theatrical studies allows students to pursue many different areas of specialization: playwriting and adaptation; theater journalism; dramaturgy; literary management in theater institutions; performance production; cultural

programming and project management; literary management in theater institutions; communications and artistic direction of cultural institutions; and theater history, theory, and aesthetics research. At UNATC Bucharest, theater management and theater journalism are a part of the Theater Studies concept, and there is also a Master's in playwriting within the Theatre Directing department, coordinated mainly by theater directors but also by one of the authors mentioned below, Mihaela Mihailov.

The University of Arts in Târgu-Mureș trains mainly dramaturgs, but graduates can only find jobs in fields close to dramaturgy. The official document describing the jobs that can be held in the Romanian state does not yet include the job title of dramaturg, which makes the process of professionalization rather uncertain. ”Even now, there is no official dramaturg job within the theater institution. The experience of being constantly asked what you actually do will live with you for a very long time, because in our country you speak of [the] dramaturg while this job officially does not exist.” (Deák 2018) Most Hungarian-language theaters may employ their dramaturgs as literary managers and not as dramaturgs. In Romanian theater higher education, working with dramatic texts is not a priority for dramaturgs, as Romanian theater does not traditionally separate the dramaturg's responsibilities into new play development, production dramaturgy, research, and literary management (Deák 2018), and the work with the text is usually done by the director and/or their assistant.

The term "in-house director" is used for a contracted director or a regularly returning guest director, but the term "in-house author" is only used when the author is also the director of the text. There are exceptions, of course: Matei Vișniec, for whom a theater in Suceava was named on his 60th birthday, is an in-house-author. This does not mean that the theater commissions plays from him, but that older works are frequently staged or productions of his works by

other theaters are invited. So, there are barely any resident authors employed as "in-house authors" and training is not going in that direction either. Directors, stage designers, music composers, choreographers, and dramaturgs who work with one company for a long period of time have the chance to develop a common theatrical language and a shared vision. But for several reasons (financial, repertorial, artistic) it is not in the tradition of Romanian theater to have such long-term collaborations with playwrights, although whenever this happens the results are palpable in terms of public interest and artistic development. Theaters in Târgu-Mureș or Cluj have sporadically contracted authors to write plays over several years (like Alina Nelega, Csaba Székely and András Visky) and the performances produced as a result proved that such long-term collaborations are not only viable, but command public and professional interest and enrich the creative process for all involved.

1.2. Playwrights Making Their Own Way

"The authors still living in Romania are more inclined to critique the lack of resources and opportunities for playwrights in this country, and they tend to compare the local context with the much better conditions designed in time in Western societies, such as Germany and France, or they deplore the fact that they cannot make a living as playwrights and they need to have day jobs, a fact that slows down their writing career." (Modreanu 2019, 36)

This fact is also complemented by the reality that in Romania, the operations of theater institutions make it difficult for new theatrical concepts and new creative approaches to emerge. Neither the funding system nor the development of repertoires or established performance schedules are conducive to presenting or staging work that is both artistically and politically risky. The critical mindset of the

playwrights analyzed is difficult to integrate into a hierarchical theater system based on state funding. Political censorship was abolished with the change of regime, but the hierarchy of decisions and responsibilities of directors remained. It is typical that the author-creators are more quickly recognized abroad. Most of them pursued the *Ionesco road*, first gaining recognition abroad and then attracting attention at home as a result of the international response. Cărbunariu, Nelega, and Peca became known in their home countries after their appointments as Royal Court Resident Fellows, while Stănescu was in charge of the Eastern European division of the Lark Play Development Center in New York City. Elise Wilk was a Lark Resident Fellow five years ago. Romanian-born Viennese Thomas Perle's text has been translated into Romanian with the support of the Fabulamundi European Playwriting project.

Exercise: One of the traps of institutional theater and repertory theater, is the actors' high professional comfort, since there are employees hired to fulfill all tasks related to the actors' work (costumes, requisites, lights, makeup, etc.) Thus, I consider it an important exercise especially for students training to become actors, to try themselves out in all these fields of work: working with the lights, with the costumes, being technical director, etc. Once they get to know these fields of work, they will have much healthier relationships within the work processes of repertory theaters. The same goes for directing students, and really, for everybody entering theater institutions, it can help break down hierarchical behaviors.

> The exercise can prove to be useful even in project-based theater organizations, since in some of these cases there isn't even a professional to do this work in their place.

According to Romanian critic and curator Cristina Modreanu, Gianina Cărbunariu and Bogdan Georgescu (along with other playwrights of their generation) became transglobal artists. So, it sometimes happens that the training of Romanian playwrights takes place abroad, and thanks to those international experiences, those authors have developed more expansive dramatic languages with which to write about specifically Romanian themes, since its subjects, often taboo, did not permit playwrights to freely explore suitable artistic languages at home. These authors not only take up completely new themes, but also present fresh dramatic worlds. On the stage new plays were performed, that, unlike the national tradition, are not about heroes, but about the darker and more ordinary aspects of the everyday lives of Romanian citizens: economic emigration, lack of education, corruption, bureaucracy, sexual abuse, juvenile delinquency, segregation, etc.

1.3. Authorship

The texts presented on stage, written by these authors are often the result of collective work rather than traditional playwriting. When the rehearsals begin, the text is still in development and is finalized by the creative team of the performance during the work process. Rather than creating the performance from an already completed text, texts are written for the performance situation. In the case of Cărbunariu, Hogman, Georgescu, Peca, it is only possible to speak of a

dramatic text after the performance is ready, and even after the premiere the text can still undergo changes. Nevertheless, once the text has been translated into another language, international premieres pop up without the ongoing involvement of the author. This creative process is most striking in the case of Cărbunariu, as her plays have been translated and performed in various European languages.

From the perspective of theatrical practice, the difference between literary drama and performance text can be defined as follows: in the first case the text induces the action on stage, and in the latter case the action induces the text. Cărbunariu, Georgescu, and Hogman develop the final form of their text during a creative rehearsal process with the actors which involves improvisations, incorporation of personal stories, etc. The text is the result of collaboration, yet only one person claims the responsibility of authorship. In the case of a collectively created work, the text is still signed by the director, so authorship is attributed to the director. A good example of this is the multiple Uniter Prize-winning director Radu Afrim, who uses improvisations by the actors to create the order of the scenes of the performance, and texts of these scenes are written down by an assistant, yet the director is conventionally held to be author of this script, unless stated otherwise.

The texts are characterized by socially sensitive themes, the use of documents (Cărbunariu), provocative, argotic, vulgar language (Peca), the dialect and jargon of the different social strata, the crowded poxy neighborhoods (Nelega). The Romanian theater often acts against political power, institutional corruption, and the opaqueness of the country's bureaucratic system, as performances often deal with scandalous and divisive cases largely discussed by the media.

1.4. Possibilities: Grants and Applications

In Romania, drama competitions have become more frequent in the last two decades, and they are open to both finished texts and draft texts. The prizes of these contests are the public presentation of the text and/or a cash prize. DramAcum (meaning DramaNow) was one of the first to launch a competition for young playwrights with the aim of supporting and generating new Romanian drama. It was founded in 2000 by Nicolae Mandea, Andreea Valean, Gianina Cărbunariu, Radu Apostol, and Alexandru Berceanu, all graduates of the UNATC Bucharest, and joined in 2010 by Ana Mărgineanu, Maria Manolescu, and Peca Ștefan. Institutions with serious financial resources did not join this initiative for a long period, but now festivals and theaters regularly announce drama competitions with a high participation rate. These possibilities to apply with a finished play have led to an increasing number of finished drama texts on the Romanian cultural scene. Playwriting residencies are also being organized more frequently and regularly by foundations and creative workshops. Since 2016, the #Reactor de creație și experiment (creative and experimental space) in Cluj has been organizing the *Drama 5* program, which gives each year the opportunity to five playwrights to present their work. The program is mentored by playwright Alina Nelega, who also represents Romania at *Fabulamundi. Fabulamundi's* large-scale European playwriting project, *Playwriting Europe: Beyond borders?,* offering writing residencies where foreign playwrights give workshops for local writers, while plays by selected Romanian authors are translated and performed across Europe. Seven of the nine authors featured below participated in *Fabulamundi* between 2017 and 2020.

The Romanian state-run National Cultural Fund (Administrația Fondului Cultural Național, AFCN) supports the creation of performances on social issues, and the creative process often includes writing new texts for the performances

financed. The quality of the work submitted is relevant in financing the projects and the AFCN has no censorship role. The political discourse in Romania has not really caught up with the discourse on crisis management in European societies, in terms of racism, domestic violence, religious extremism, etc., and the AFCN in its own way gives theaters the opportunity to address these issues. A good example of this is the bilingual performance *99.6%* produced at #Reactor, a work of collective authorship on the conflicts and coexistence of different ethnicities in Transylvania, which has received positive critical response from both Romanian and Hungarian reviewers.

However, it should be noted, what seems to be a major step in directing attention and financial support to projects dealing with acute social problems is often an ambiguous gesture on behalf of the state. As Patrice Pavis points out, "Theater is being forced to compensate for the state's failings in the areas of social inequality, the misguided integration of immigrants, unemployment, racism and violence" (Patkó 2020). State support, unfortunately, is often a strategy for central authorities to bypass the responsibility of solving these issues with effective policy by tossing the burden in the lap of cultural workers.

1.5. Publishing Drama

Romanian drama publishing is mainly organized and facilitated by the aforementioned Uniter's publishing house, Unitext, which has been publishing contemporary Romanian theater texts for twenty years. Unitext describes itself as "The only publishing house in Romania specializing exclusively in theater books." It also publishes plays by contemporary foreign authors translated into Romanian, and its drama series has been expanded to include other theater-related books: monographs, interviews, books, diaries, anthologies,

etc. However, its list of titles and distribution numbers have grown only modestly. For the last seven years, Uniter's website has published only the Uniter prize-winning plays and a single collection of *Fabulamundi* plays by contemporary foreign authors. Among the authors discussed, Unitext has published Uniter Prize-winning plays by Mihaela Michailov and Alina Nelega, and a small number of international and Romanian theater books by authors like Ion Cojar, George Banu, Peter Brook, Declan Donellan, and Hans-Thies Lehmann. But the publisher, devoted to publishing books in printed form and constrained by the time the printing process entails, has difficulty keeping up with the constant influx of new drama and current theater literature.

LiterNet, on the other hand, provides free online access to books, essays, diaries, research papers, and journalism on a wide range of subjects and disciplines. The online publisher's catalog is easy to browse, and the ever-expanding theater series lists a wide range of contemporary plays, along with some classics. LiterNet's collection is a good substitute for the shortage of new material in print publishing, making accessible writings by contemporary authors, often in translation alongside the original. The plays produced through the Drama 5 playwriting residency are also published annually by LiterNet as digital volumes.

In Romania some theater institutions also publish books. The annual international festival of the Radu Stanca Theater in Sibiu (FITS) hosts several book launches, many of which are underwritten by the theater as publisher. The books are available for purchase during the festival, but further acquisition is difficult, as they do not reach a wide audience and are rarely ever reprinted. The State Theater in Timisoara has also started to offer theater publications at its international festival FEST-FDR. But after five books and nineteen periodicals, the promising series *atent* (meaning "attentive, observant") has been discontinued. Hungarian translations of contemporary Romanian plays are regularly published in

several theater journals and publications, such as the monthly *Színház* periodical, the quarterly *Játéktér Theater Periodical*, or the summer compressed issues of the *Látó Literary Journal*. Sometimes, when they have the opportunity, authors will independently publish their performance texts, but these are not widely publicized and are not available on the publishing market, nor are they integrated into the public consciousness of a broad readership.

1.6. Authors, Our Contemporaries

The following dramatic texts by the artists I've been discussing have not been selected out of aesthetic preference, but for the strength and distinctiveness of their dramaturgical approaches to theatrical presentation. Their contributions to the formal and performative elements of writing for the stage will allow us to anchor our analysis in a theater-centered, performance-oriented framework.

The Plays of Gianina Cărbunariu

Every time I work with Cărbunariu's plays, I am provoked – or rather invited – to take a stand. Be that about racism, about power plays within the theater world, or about much simpler, everyday decisions that define our social life, I am personally challenged to examine myself: do I close my eyes or speak up? I find her artistic invitations to self-evaluation very honest, direct, and convincing. Her plays always remind me that making theater only really matters if you can commit, artistically and personally, to improving oneself and the world, both within and beyond the walls of the theater.

In 2005, as a fresh alumnus of UNATC Bucharest, Cărbunariu wrote and directed *Stop the Tempo*, marking the beginning of her career as *dramaturg director*, a term pinpointed by Cărbunariu in her doctoral thesis. Writing and

directing one's own play (text) was a less practiced way of theatermaking in Romania, so the novelty was not only the text itself, but also the process of making theater.

Cărbunariu became known in the Hungarian speaking regions with *20/20*, a performance presented in 2009 at the Yorick Studio in Târgu-Mures. The bilingual Hungarian-Romanian performance spoke about the "Black March"[5] in Târgu-Mureș in documentary theater language, with surprising honesty and openness. "It is a historical performance: not because it is about history, about the recent past, but because it breaks something: silence, taboos, fears, cultural enclosures, which are typical for both Hungarian and Romanian theater in Romania." (Tompa 2010) The text of the performance, composed of interviews and personal testimonies, was a novelty. The interviews were conducted by the creative team, who spoke to the participants of the bloody events, both Romanian and Hungarian. The actors who took part in the demonstration in the town square of Târgu-Mureș or witnessed the Black March events included their own testimonies and recollections within the performance. The creative team brought together five local Hungarian actors and five Romanian actors from Bucharest, allowing a more objective perspective to emerge from the variety of subjective accounts.

The theme of Romanian politics is an integral element of Cărbunariu's artistic interests. She is known for her examination of events that have not reached a social consensus, and which are still surrounded by contradictory positions and political discourses. *Solitarity* (2013), a portmanteau combining "solidarity" and "solitary," originated from a recent event in which the mayor of Baia Mare, with considerable

[5] Black March 16-21 March 1990 - the two ethnicities living peacefully together in the city bloodily clashed in the center of the town, bringing tension and animosity between Romanian and Hungarian people who just few months before hoped for a better living together after the fall of the communist regime.

support from the town's residents, built a wall between the Roma community and the nearby neighborhood. This was defended in local political discourse with ideas like "protection", "integration", and "improving the quality of life for residents." In *Everyday People* (2016), the author explores the cases of whistleblowers from different countries, with a special emphasis on the corruption of Romania's state road construction company, focusing on a recent case of fraud and embezzlement of public funds by public officials. The play brings forward office workers who never wanted to enter the public spotlight but felt some kind of civic responsibility to denounce the corruption around them. Their commitment to government transparency ultimately destroyed their mental and physical health, as well as their families'. The play ends with excerpts of real interviews with these people, who each state that despite the hardships they faced and continue to face, they still could have not done otherwise. In her 2014 drama *For Sale*, Cărbunariu again explored political corruption in an incident surrounding the extraction of shale gas in the fields of a remote Romanian village. The residents, misinformed and disinformed about the financial and environmental consequences of drilling for gas on their own lands, are subjected to the tragic fallout of government secrecy.

All three of these Cărbunariu productions were staged in state theaters of Bucharest and Sibiu, sold out to large audiences, and received numerous festival invitations. The Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj produced Cărbunariu's *Roșia Montană - On a Physical Line and on a Political Line* (2010), a work that reflects on the scandals surrounding the ecological disaster of gold mining in Roșia Montană, an event that had sparked a firestorm of media debate. Created as a truly collective work, the text was co-written by Cărbunariu, Peca Ștefan, and Andreea Valean, and the directing was signed by Cărbunariu, Andreea Valean, and Radu Apostol.

Cărbunariu has become – along with her like-minded colleagues – a known advocate for collaborative theater-making

practices that mirror the collaborative efforts required to address today's burning social issues. This work also requires shared research into true events via archival research, interviews, and keen sociopolitical analysis. But despite her interest in developing work out of documentary sources, Cărbunariu's aesthetic style never feels like a staged reproduction of those documents, but is infused with fiction, improvisation, and a humorous touch that lends an unmistakable artfulness to her treatment of the archive. In her residencies abroad, the artistic intelligence and social integrity of her theater has garnered international interest in her unique approach to documentary aesthetics.

The kind of open and honest theatrical discourse on social problems embodied by Cărbunariu has gained ground not only in independent theaters, which are underfunded and command smaller audiences, but also in theatrical institutions run on municipal or state public funds. This is a huge step from the severe censorship exercised in the cultural sphere before the fall of the iron wall. It should be stressed that since many European-funded application structures support the creation of such socially charged performances, larger theater establishments are also taking advantage of these funding opportunities and are thereby incentivized to make space for such themes on their stages. This, in part, has made large theater institutions very receptive to Cărbunariu's personal practice of tackling taboo subjects and silenced events.

Beyond Romania, she has been staging and co-producing her own texts internationally with entities like Centro Dramatico Madrid, Teatro E. Romagna Bologna, Theater Freiburg, Hunger for Trade Project, Festival Avignon, etc. In addition to these international productions, she also organizes projects, festivals, and open competitions for young directors at the Youth Theatre in Piatra-Neamț, her hometown, and attracts young audiences to the theater. Opening the theater building to high school students for activities

and forums to meet, holding discussions with them about the performances presented, and supporting their burgeoning processes of artistic expression are exemplary of how Cărbunariu transforms the theater she leads into an inspiring cultural center for the local community.

> **Exercise**: In a roundtable discussion, inquire about the motivations of those involved in a production. What do they expect from the rehearsal process, from each other, and from the performance or workshop? What are the vulnerabilities of those involved? What should be taken into consideration? It is very useful to both verbalize our own motivations and to hear what goals others bring to the process. We might discover shared motivations and aspirations, or we could find others hold opposing or competing values. At the end of this exercise, always try to find thoughts that are shared by everyone in the creating group and establish a common ground for the work about to start.

The Plays of Bogdan Georgescu

In 2005, together with fellow directors, Georgescu initiated the tangaProject, which offers a collaborative community-oriented theater whose work reacts immediately to Romanian current affairs. One of these collaborative works, *România! Te pup* (*Kiss and Goodbye Romania*) is one of Georgescu's best-known plays. Created in 2009, the text deals with several mainstream Romanian themes: the mass emigration of the country's labor force and intellectual class, the deplorable state of the Romanian railway system, crime, corruption, and the neighborhood life of the Romanian

cities. In a comic way, Georgescu reflects on the helplessness in which ordinary citizens live. The text of the drama was written during a creative workshop, using collective working methods, and was finalized by Georgescu five years later. Georgescu signs his work with the phrase "*un spectacol de Georgescu.*" This formulation is different from the usual phrase "directed by," as it includes the concept of directing but expands its limits of contribution, including any kind of work needed to make a performance, from directing to making the lights.

Exercise: This task is for groups that have known each other for some time and are used to working together. We give improvisation themes and those observing the improvisation propose one extra word or short sentences. If the theme of the improvisation is waiting, those improvising start to build the theme, and from the outside we might hear someone call out: "Hug her!" "Hurts!" "When?" "Red!" etc. It is important to give enough time for the improvisers to elaborate on the new direction given from the outside. Whatever we get in response to our prompt, it is important to accept it. If we say "Red!" while thinking of an apple, and the improvisers use "Red!" for makeup, we must accept this and not try to redirect the improvising to something we want. The observers also need to learn to feel when they can intervene and how much they can do this. This exercise is helpful in scene building.

In his more recent plays, Georgescu uses collective creative methods to address events in the headlines of Romanian

news outlets. In contrast to *Kiss and Goodbye...*, the text was developed during the rehearsal process of the performances. In *Antisocial* (2015) he talks about the inconsistencies of the Romanian education system; in *#Minor* (2016) he addresses the problems of minors and our social responsibility towards them; in *MalPraxis* (2017) Georgescu looks at the anomalies of the health system. Georgescu's 2019 theater work, *Sexodrom*, presents a performance of #metoo stories from the Roma community in Romania, in collaboration with the Association of Romanian Roma Actors. These texts and their performances are part of a long-term creative project which the author-director calls an "observational project of active art."[6] Active Art is a method that combines devised and documentary theater techniques with observational acting in order to create new theatrical means of expression and responsive dramatic structures.

Bogdan Georgescu is one of the first young Romanian theater-makers of the post-communist generations to conceptualize long-term directorial projects, allowing the public to follow his ongoing treatment of these social concerns through the years. Directors, especially the ones at the beginning of their career are not used to promoting long-term directorial projects, as they depend on invitations from very different theaters year by year. Today, Georgescu is not the only one practicing this still very rare structuring of one's directorial-artistic path.

> **Exercise:** This exercise is for creating group harmony. We give voices, sounds, or words to each other. The group spreads out in space. The first person makes a sound (it can be text or singing or any verbal signal). That person walks toward another participant and, maintaining eye contact, gives them the sound again, and occupies

[6] https://www.frixberg.de/bogdan-georgescu/

the place of the receiver For a few moments they share the sound. The receiver then takes the sound over, walks in space, and gives that sound to the next person. The sound can be changed during the process if it builds up from what one has received.

Another version of this exercise: when a sound is given to a person, the giver and receiver keep the sound and, rather than the first person taking the place of the receiver, they together walk to the third person. Those three all keep the sound and advance to the fourth person, and so on. The whole group will move together until the last person has received the sound as well. When the group has ceased their motion and everyone has received the sound, switch off the lights to let the sound fill the space.

You can evolve, modify, and add to the sound once the group is in synchronicity.

The Plays of Ioana Hogman

Hogman graduated in playwriting at the University of Arts in Târgu-Mureș with her 2017 dissertation play *Diptic*. Inspired by the paintings of Vasiliy Kandinsky, she explores the communicative possibilities of theatrical and textual abstraction. This poetic piece, according to the author's instructions, was written in the emotional space of the actor. Its language is very idiosyncratic, breaking with the conventions of traditional playwriting, marked by repetition, an abundance of question marks and ellipses, odd or improper sentence composition, and sudden alternations between verse and prose. Composed of poetic, lyrical monologues of varying lengths, its fragmentary elements are linked organically

and discursively, but not through conventional narrative. Dramatic conflict is not found in these texts in the usual way. The associations created within the reader-spectator may generate tension, or perhaps not at all. Dramatic action is absent as well; long descriptions of actions might be the most we get.

This kind of writing is also characteristic of Hogman's 2019 *Îmi place sushi (I Like Sushi*), where the central themes are fear and masculinity, tangibly intertwined features of Romanian society. While writing the piece, the author actively participated in rehearsals, incorporating some of the dialogue born from improvisational exercises into the corpus of the text. It is a rare occasion when a female author reflects on masculinity with male actors and a male director, and this is emphasized in the performance. The play's collection of stories, taken from personal experiences of the creative cast, evoke fears on different affective levels, from loneliness, worry, or anxiety to being afraid of death. Hogman filters these intimate accounts through her own writing, so that they are woven anonymously into the fabric of the theatrical text, rather than remaining confessional material attached to specific actors. In this way, her texts generate identification and empathy with authentic personal experiences, while affording both actors and audience a degree of emotional distance. Hogman's recent compositions are also multi-authored works, with the final version of the text emerging during the staging process, such as her 2020 play *Interior-lumină* (*Inside-Light*) at the #Reactor in Cluj. In Transylvania, the number of experimental spaces like #Reactor is negligible, with most independent creative programs and associations (still relatively few in number) in Bucharest.

Hogman started her theatrical career as a resident at #Reactor's Fresh Start program, making her debut as playwright-dramaturg with the 2018 production of *Ziua în care papucii mei și-au înghițit limba* (*The Day My Shoes Swallowed*

Their Tongue). As a member of the newest generation of playwrights, she states the following:

> "*I'm currently interested in moving towards interdisciplinarity, to incorporate science (genetics, microbiology, ecology) into my texts and to explore how far the boundaries of the profession of author and dramaturg can be stretched. I am less and less attracted to theater in its raw theatrical form, and I would like to move towards hybrid projects, working in creative communities of people from different professions. This doesn't mean I'm giving up theater, but I'm looking for different ways of relating, to change the conventions of theater, to experiment with new relationships with audiences and fellow creative artists.*"[7]

In our current context, in which the attention and financial support paid to culture and science by the state apparatus is dwindling, it is understandable that transdisciplinarity is less present. Curiosity towards other disciplines is palpably absent, as are forums for dialogue between disciplines, making it a rarity for the likes of science and dramaturgy to interpenetrate one another. Having a dramaturg working on this subject is not just new but has a big potential of opening the regional theatrical discourse we are accustomed to. The interdisciplinary projects outlined in the quote are at the moment quite alien even to the theatrical spaces – like #Reactor – that are based on research and innovative theatrical experiments.

[7] Hogman's email response on the 11th of September 2020.

The plays of Mihaela Michailov

Addressing young people through theatrical methods has become the main focus of Michailov's work as a playwright. In 2015, she co-founded the Replika Theatre Education Center in Bucharest, which addresses social problems affecting children and youth in Romania. The opening performance, *Familia Offline* (2015), written by Michailov, thematizes the children of migrant workers who stay behind in Romania, while their parents work in a western country. *Copii răi!* (*Bad kids*) from 2011 explores the violent relationship between teachers and students, the punishment mechanisms still in place in many Romanian schools, namely the bullying and social exclusion of underachieving students. Michailov's dramas are, in her own words,

> *...communities of words that struggle for the redistribution of power poles in our contemporary society and for the deepening of realities presented from a mono perspective. My themes are sexual and racial discrimination, the living conditions of miners in Romania after 1989, the miners' marches, the voices of children and youth. I believe in political theater for children, which gives a radical political perspective to their innocence, so that they can grow up with a consciousness of their social values.*[8]

In her 2009 play *Cum Traversează Barbie Criza Mondială (How Barbie Overcomes the Global Crisis)*, she gives voice to the first-world problems precipitated by the 2008-2009 economic, starring a teenage girl at the center of it. Amid complex familial relationships (mother-daughter, wife-husband) and detached social types (like the lonely zen-guy), Barbie

[8] Fabulamundi – self-introduction of the playwright, 2017 Online access: https://www.fabulamundi.eu/en/playwrights/mihaela-michailov/

appears, influencing all to write and keep rules for a better living. Ignorance has reached its zenith while the world around is collapsing. The call to articulate a precise recipe for a perfect life drives the irony and humor of the text. Michailov does not write dialogues for her characters, but instead asks the director and creative team to decide for themselves who says what during the rehearsal process. The author gives lots of freedom for the artists, inviting their perspectives and interpretation to bear on the subject matter. I have worked with this text twice, with seven years in between, and with both casts found brand new ways of structuring and formulating the performance. *Capete Înfierbântate* (*Hot Heads*) is a documentary play about the miners' marches of the early 90s in Bucharest. Produced at the Replika Educational Center, the performance was invited to several international festivals in 2010. A year later, Michailov followed up on its success with *Subpământ* (*Underground*), a play about the lives of unemployed miners in the Jiu valley. These performance texts present open wounds of the recent past, and are preceded by meticulous fieldwork involving interviews with the miner families and other industry professionals, as well as an extensive process of documenting field research in photos, videos, and notes. All this documentary material is presented to audiences alongside the performances within small exhibition events organized around, before, and after the performances.

Exercise: The essence of this exercise is self-awareness and self-analysis. The actor's internal, private evaluation of a performance doesn't always have the same effect and expressiveness for the audience who receives it. It is useful to make a videorecording of the scene that we're working on and later have a critical discussion about what can be seen from the outside. This process can be repeated as many times as it feels needed.

With students this practice is particularly helpful in their first couple of years of study as they develop a healthy sense of self-criticism.
In some cases, students and actors are sure about things happening to and within them on stage that don't actually happen for the audience or are not visible at all for the viewer. Internal states of inspiration and flow may engender premature confidence in a performance, and reviewing these scenes can point out important issues for the developing actor.

The Plays of Alina Nelega

I've already mentioned Nelega's work several times. Her plays have been translated, produced, and published both nationally and internationally. She twice received the UNITER prize for best play for *www.nonstop.ro* in 2000 and *În trafic* (*In Traffic)* in 2014, and she holds the European Author Accolade (Heidelberg Stueckemarkt, 2007) for her play *Amalia respiră adânc* (*Amalia Takes a Deep Breath*). Nelega is also an acclaimed playwriting professor and has served as the Honorary Fellow in Writing at Iowa University. A mentor and professional trainer in university and residency programs; a translator; a director and facilitator of international playwriting projects; and artistic director of the Liviu Rebreanu Company at the National Theater in Târgu-Mureș between 2012 and 2017, Alina Nelega is now known and acclaimed novelist as well.

The exploration of local issues, the broadening of Romania's visibility in Europe, and making Romanian drama internationally known, as well as incorporating international influences into Romanian drama writing are important goals in both her artistic and teaching careers. Her drama *Taxi*

Vinyl (2005) is based on the structure of Arthur Schnitzler's 1987 play *La Ronde* (*The Circle*). The play offers a more intimate insight into the lives of the young inhabitants of a city block neighborhood, a place that bears an uncanny resemblance to the city of Târgu-Mureș. What happens behind the small apartment walls is discussed in the *Graffiti. drimz* as a "poetically written emotional break-dance that keeps the neighborhood universe spinning" (Boicea 2010) about the future-deprived lives of young people growing up in block neighborhoods and their parents.

Exercise: At the beginning of the exercise, actors choose a story from their childhood and share it with the group in the most natural and factual way possible.
The actors must define themselves through a chosen character. This character should be very strongly defined by way of speaking, gestures, habits etc. I usually advise them to choose a person whom they know or follow closely, but a fictional character is also a good way to do it. One could choose Professor Snape from Harry Potter as well as their grandmother. The childhood story will then be told by the character chosen. If the exercise is successful, the actors can choose new characters and interpret the story again, transforming it the way their character needs it. If Snape were to tell the childhood story first, the grandmother would follow with her own interpretation. In short: play with it and have fun.

Nelega finds the human, the universal in the outlined life situations. The characters are brought close to us by their existential questions formulated as basic needs of human

affection: a boy needs love from his father, the young are compelled to pursue their dreams, a girl longs for a boy to appreciate her for what she is. Nelega does not deny them their unfulfilled wishes, but in her writing makes it clear that life is hard for those who live on the margins of societal recognition. This method is evident in her writing: in the clear language, the precisely structured situations, the subtextuality of the monologues.

The highlight of her playwriting are the three monologues that have been translated and performed in several languages: the *XXE-uri* (*XXE Project*) from 2001, *Decalogul după Hess* (*The Ten Commandments of Rudolf Hess*) from 2003, and *Amalia respiră adânc* (*Amalia Takes a Deep Breath*) from 2005. In several cases Nelega was also the director of her plays, and if not, she actively participated at the rehearsals. Her writing has been aptly described as:

> *…part of a creative process in which the author and the actor are in direct contact, the role of the director as mediator being diminished. On the one hand, it is a form that underpins the need and necessity for the playwright to get as close as possible to the stage, to know its possibilities, its requirements, and its expectations. […] A versatile theater person, Alina Nelega develops her own theory of playwriting for the 21st century, which she calls* deteatralisation. *(Rotescu 2005)*

Nelega's concept of *deteatralisation* alludes to and inverts the well-known *reteatralisation* concept of Romanian theater, coined and introduced in the 50s by a group of young directors like the acclaimed Liviu Ciulei. The call to "re-theatricalize" the Romanian stage was a polemic-fueled rejection of socialist realism and domestic drama. The proponents of the new aesthetics advocated for the reclamation of theatricalist sensibilities and an aesthetics of stylization and formal

experimentation, even if these could only be applied – due to censorship – to those classical and canonical texts already in the state-approved repertory. This approach, which would become the predominant paradigm until 1989, resulted in consecrated and artistically outstanding performances. This thesis was built on the strong imagery composed on stage by the director, combined with a vast knowledge of directorial techniques. This period was considered, and maybe it is to this day, the golden era of Romanian theater. It also coincided with the ascent of the director's authority. Nelega herself is a director with rich directorial technique knowledge – putting several of her own texts onstage – and her notion of *deteatralisation* proposal to find out the truth of the text, the format of staging together with the actor is proposing a very different kind of collaborative work than the canonized concept of *reteatralisation*.

Exercise: Read the chosen play backwards, starting from the last scene, go from scene to scene and discover what is the less needed for the actions, situations that are present in the analyzed section. Take as an example the last scene in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the king's last words right before his death:

And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life.
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
And thou no breath at all? O, thou wilt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never. — Pray you, undo
This button. Thank you, sir. O, O, O, O!
Do you see this? Look on her. Look, her lips,
Look there, look there.

> Lear speaks about Cordelia; he holds her in his arms. Every verb in this text is about eyesight, about seeing and watching. What did he notice, what did he suddenly see on the dead girl that he did not see before? In these last minutes of death, he speaks about the girl, he draws attention to her. Where was this attention before? Etc.

The plays of Peca Ștefan

The winner of DramAcum's first playwriting competition, *Ziua futută a lui Nils* (*Nils' Fucked Up Day*), received a sharp critical reception after its premiere in 2008 at the Teatrul LUNI de la Green Hours in Bucharest. This negative feedback was to be expected, as the organizers issued an ironic warning in the promotional material of the performance that "the text deliberately uses extremely explicit language. Minors and ultra-shy people are not allowed." As an author, Peca is a real provocateur: his characters swear and use drugs' several scenes from his plays are pseudo-pornographic scenes; and he places anarchist texts in the mouths of some of his characters. In the early 2000s, Peca was the first to touch on such themes. *Nils...* was published in print by the independent theater Teatrul Imposibil in Cluj, together with three other texts. His plays had a huge impact on contemporary Romanian theater, drawing attention to something so obvious it had never been seriously addressed in discourse or practice: young people, writers, theater-makers, and audiences alike are looking for new themes, indicating a need to update the tools and values of contemporary drama with more daring measures. In Peca's work, this awakening is triggered through insolence and crassness, in plays constructed out of vulgar language and obscene scenes. Theater was and remains an implicit cultural tool for the education

of the public, so presenting such performances violates this silent arrangement between artist and audience. Peca breaks with this institutional politeness and thrusts taboo themes onto the stage – themes that had already been approached in contemporary Romanian filmmaking, but not in theater. Peca went on to write more than thirty plays which were performed in Bucharest's independent theater scene and in some state venues. He became an inevitable part of the discourse on contemporary Romanian playwrights, but his texts were not necessarily integrated into the emerging canon of recent Romanian drama. The highlight of his career was the large-scale theater project realized together with director Ana Mărgineanu, a series of performances produced in several small Romanian towns with local theater companies. The performances are based on the everyday life of the local people in these cities, in which the text and performance-structure are developed after a longer period of on-site documentation by two artists. Peca later gained international recognition, won awards, and was selected as one of the top thirty-five European playwrights at the Berliner Theatertreffen festival in 2013. He is currently living in Berlin. Without his ferocity and boldness, the new generation of playwrights and theater-makers in Romania, liberated and freed from all political pressures and theatrical traditions, might not have exploded so suddenly and forcefully in Romania.

Exercise: The goal of this exercise is to develop an in-depth analysis of a single gesture, to observe and feel how a single gesture can have many variations and meanings in our everyday lives. I suggest the study of three different kinds of gestures:
(1) innate gestures (eg, the infant rubbing the eyes when sleepy), (2) acquired gestures (eg, how to put on wedding rings at a marriage ceremony,

and (3) gestures expressing social status (eg, handshakes, salutations, etc.)
Take notes of your observations, then share these within the group. Draw together the conclusions of the group into a summary.

The Plays of Thomas Perle

Perle emigrated from Romania to Germany with his family as a child. After completing his theater studies, he began writing and winning prizes and scholarships in Germany and Austria. He writes in German but can be discussed also as a contemporary Romanian playwright because of the Romanian themes throughout his work. Perle's plays, performed in Germany and Austria, have dealt with themes from domestic life: the child-parent relationship, love affairs, family issues, female alcoholism, etc. In his 2020 play *LIVE*, he again writes about Romanian themes. Together with his creative team, he explored the social paralysis and insecurity caused by the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. They created a play containing five intertwining stories from the virtual space of the internet. His 2022 collaboration with Radu Stanca theater in Sibiu, *domnul iedeman* (*mister iedeman*), combines a local story with the famous Austrian play, the *Jedermann: Play of The Rich Man's Death* (1911) by Hugo von Hofmannstahl – a play included yearly in the repertory of the Salzburg Festival for a hundred years now. Perle rewrites and reinterprets this emblematic Austrian play by placing Mr. Jedermann (Everyman) in a nearby spa city that once was Transylvania's iconic thermal spa attraction. Mr. Jedermann wants to restore the spas as a shrine to the Habsburg empire and as an economic boon for the locals, but to do this he must cut down the nearby woods. Perle advances a cynical analysis of a canonical

play of German-speaking culture, writing a textual pastiche that bridges local and international European cultural geographies.

Exercise: I recommend this exercise to acting students in their fourth semester or final year of studies. It is important that the teacher or supervisor of this exercise is sure that all members of the performing group are ready for this exercise, and they all know what the goal is. At a chosen time of day, all participants start from the same place (like a central town square). Each participant chooses a pedestrian and begins following them. It is not recommended to follow any single person for a long period of time, since the essence of this exercise is observation and not intrusion into anyone's personal life. Keeping distance and respecting the pedestrian's privacy is vital. The participants need to remain aware of the state this procedure puts them in: participants should note how they walked in the town before the exercise, how they walk differently during the exercise, how do they act when following someone as they pass unnoticed? What can we observe about our own personality while we are observing someone else?
This exercise can be performed within the university campus as well.
When the exercise is over, make notes of the observations. This is a two-part task. First, note the gestures and habits of the person observed. From these, write down the impressions on this person's character, their imagined life story, background, etc. Second, share with the group performing this exercise the feelings, changes,

and impressions that occurred to us as observers during the exercise. In this role, how did we see the town, the streets, etc. and what did we do to make sure we weren't noticed?
The exercise helps in building character and story and sharpens skills of observation, imagination, and physical interpretation.

In *Karpatenflecken* (*Carpathian Spots*) from 2019, Perle explores the basic experiences of homeland and homelessness by working on the history of the multiple emigrations undertaken by the Zips – a northern Transylvanian, German-speaking people of the former Scepusium land. Perle points out the contradictory nature of the situations of migration and emigration. Documentary and (auto)fiction are combined in stark poetic language. Lacking punctuation, the text becomes an open invitation for personal interpretation and choice of where to place the accents. It also highlights the musicality of the old Zips language, combining Romanian and Hungarian texts (and some Latin as well). The characters speak the different languages of the local population, so the husband of Greti will swear in Romanian, a German aunt will elect to speak broken Hungarian instead of her native German language, and the Jewish woman must speak German if she wants to be understood, because there is no one left in the village from her people. By combining languages, the historical and contemporary reality of Transylvania is evoked. Some centuries-old descriptions of settlers who are on their way to make a new homeland also appear in Latin. Perle also switches the timelines of the scenes as his account of this Zips family history alternates between past and present. With these leaps in time Perle brings forth the state of mind, the desperation or exhilaration, of fleeing people who lose their homes or discover new ones. An old

local song connects the arc of the dramatic text. The play gives voice to three different generations of emigrants from the same family, all women, who have lived through different historical periods – offering a tragicomic perspective on the harsh political history of the region, characterized by ethnic discrimination.

The Plays of Saviana Stănescu

Like Perle, Stănescu returns to Romania often for different theater projects, though she has resided in the United States for over twenty years. Her Romanian and Albanian ancestry is important for her, and she presents herself as a multi-ethnic playwright. Her texts are often performed in Romania, where she regularly holds masterclasses in playwriting and leads various theater projects. Stănescu was a poet and journalist when her dramatic poems were first presented in the form of theater performances. When *Proscrisa* (*The Exiled Woman*; 1997) was presented in Paris, Stănescu's international career began. She was awarded several playwriting residencies (by Women's Project, Richard Schechner's East Coast Artists, The Audrey Fellowship, etc.) and was responsible for dramatic projects on Eastern European subjects at New York's Lark Play Development Center; she now teaches at Ithaca College in New York. But when Stănescu first emigrated, she had to go through the paces of putting together a living as an artist and slowly building recognition, like most immigrants without substantial financial background.

Her English language writing focuses on women and the fate of women in emigration. One of her most performed plays, *Waxing West* (2007), depicts the marriage of a newly emigrated beautician and the couple's struggles of making a living in the greener pastures promised them out west. As if chased by the confounding horror and allure of their Romanian homeland, they are haunted by Nicolae Ceaușescu,

the last communist president of Romania, and his wife Elena, who appear to them as vampires. Here, and in all her plays, the feminine perspective frames the dramatic world; her main characters are all women struggling to survive in a world unfamiliar and even hostile to them. In *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills* (2009), she follows four immigrants in the urban jungle of New York City, each in search of their identities as defined by legal and illegal papers, by hopes and fears, in the dramatic language of dark comedy. The typical fears of the Eastern European person are transposed into situations where one can only empathize and laugh at the same time with the characters trying to escape from being caught. The stereotypes of the immigrant are deconstructed by Stănescu, depicting real people with real emotions.

Exercise: For this exercise I suggest using the monologues found in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. I recommend using Act III, Scene 1, Act III, Scene 4, and Act IV, Scene 5, but you can choose other textual material as well. The exercise is performed by two or more students at a time. A monologue is learned by both performers of the exercise, and they first analyze the text together. Then they give the monologue facing each other as if looking into a mirror. Give time and space for this synchronicity to happen. This unity can bring several structures, movements, and responses. Dialogue can arise from this situation, and the dramatic events that emerge can be further elaborated. Different interpretations and perspectives of the same text will naturally facilitate new situations, dramatic inflection points, or conflicts. It is important to notice that we are seeing two different Hamlets, two different faces, different identities of the same character.

In preparation for the thirtieth anniversary of the 1989 revolution, Stănescu moved back to Romania for six months to create a workshop entitled *#Proiectul Revoluția* (*The Revolution Project*) and to write the text for the upcoming performance, this time in Romanian language. The documentary-style performance text addresses the incendiary question: was it really a revolution that took place in 1989 in Romania? In her dramas, Stănescu tackles problems that remain unresolved to this day. The intimate and the personal interest her very much, and when approaching the theme of the Revolution, she presents personal stories with familiar protagonists, suggesting that the heroes of the Revolution could be any of us.

The Plays of Elise Wilk

Of the playwrights presented so far, Wilk is one of the most commissioned authors. In the fifteen years that she has been writing plays, her texts have been produced in Romania and around the world. Like Matei Vișniec, presented in the next section of this chapter, she provides commissioning theaters with ready-made play texts that are later translated in many other languages.

Winner of the DramAcum debut category in 2008 with the drama *Pisica Verde* (*Green Cat*), Wilk shows her empathic interest in the world of adolescents, a universe she rewrites and reexamines in many subsequent plays, such as *Avioane de hârtie* (*Paper Flights*) from 2015. In this text we see high-school students confronting those unresolved issues that have fissured their teenage lives: bullying, poverty, young love, and parent-child relationships. The play finishes with one student going to class with a gun in his backpack. *Crocodil (Crocodile)* from 2017 closes the writing project Wilk started with Green Cat, her "trilogy of adolescence." This third part of the series analyzes in a monodramatic structure the feeling of being different and vulnerable. The sixteen

scenes of the play can be performed by one actor or several, as the monologue of the young outsider David evokes many complex, richly written characters.

The sensitivity of Wilk's writing invites the public and the creators to think about the ways our society treats the young and serves as an indictment of our communities' insufficient investment of time, energy, care, and support invested in raising up the future generation. Wilk is well versed in the world of adolescents, teenagers, and high school students: "...and in fact all characters of Elise Wilk […] irrespective of their age, have this habit – unrecognizable in real life – of escaping with eyes wide open into the world of dreams, of parallel worlds freed from the quotidian life normatives, abuses and pressures." (Wilk 2019, 203). Undoubtedly, her plays are "uncomfortable to read, because what kind of society are we if we are unable to pull out the safety net so that anyone can make their dreams come true?" (Wilk 2019, 207). Wilk points out the social failure that characterizes the treatment of young people in post-socialist Romania: "The red thread that connects the pieces is the failure of adults, of the authority figures, whether they are teachers, parents, tutors or representatives of the state, because they are not protecting young people, they cannot accompany them on the path of self-discovery, the search for identity, the assessment of their abilities." (Wilk 2019, 205) The winner of several dramaturgy prizes, Wilk keeps surprising us with new ways of presenting the emotional and quotidian space of her favorite characters, the young.

Exercise: This exercise is best done in pairs, non-verbally at first, then incorporating speech afterwards. Have a clear vision of an imagined character. Write twenty sentences describing this character: define their customs, behaviors, preferences, feelings, daily routines, visions,

dreams etc. Give the paper to your partner. The partner will impersonate the character, then it is your turn to impersonate the other character. Accept your partner's interpretation. Have the characters meet, create situations and exchange dialogue. This exercise is also useful when working on a play with written characters. New facets of a character will appear. It is not about better or worse interpretations, but about generating differences of interpretation and embodiment each time.

1.7. Contemporary Accents

Contemporary Romanian drama is in exponential development, with a spectacular increase in audience and professional interest in performances that directly address social problems (documentary theater, political theater, Roma theater, etc.). At the same time, the funding of theaters, including independent or project-based performances, is vulnerable and dependent on the political apparatus, which has been in a constant state of flux since the turnover of regimes thirty years ago, pushing generations of theater makers to remain on vigilant alert. This standby position is reflected in the writing, characterized by antagonistic attitudes and forceful advocacy or protest. The gamesmanship of Romanian politics and the prevailing insecurity of the public have rightly triggered a rebellious and resistant attitude among artists. The authors discussed above and their contemporaries, create with the conviction that theater, as an active participant in the unfolding drama of a nation, can shape society toward progress. It is important to stress that this kind of theater is political while remaining independent of political parties. The playwrights know and support each other's

work, participate in joint projects, and cultivate a thriving artistic community. DramAcum is one of the best examples, as a young generation of playwrights and theatermakers has formed around its initiatives. The professional relationship between Wilk and Nelega, which grew from that between student and mentor to collegial partners in playwriting projects, are evidence of DramAcum's important role in fostering young talent. The community of playwrights in Romania is much larger than the names mentioned above. Alexandra Badea, Lia Bugnar, Mihai Ignat, Csaba Székely, Andreea Valean, and many others are members of this talented, growing company.

In the next three chapters I will look more closely into the dramatic work of three authors whom I have collaborated with several times during the past twelve years. Their work examines how our society has and has not dealt with the past fifty years – its tragedies, its known and unknown events, its controversial legacy – from three very different poetic and dramaturgical perspectives.

Chapter 2

Directing Contemporary Playwrights: Visky, Láng, Vișniec

In this section, I address the question of ***how*** we communicate our processes of artistic discovery through various directorial and dramaturgical approaches to performance making. To do so, I examine contemporary texts written by three authors with whom I have collaborated several times in the staging of their work.

2.1. Porn – Dramaturgical Universe Created by András Visky

András Visky's plays like *Juliet*, *The Disciples*, *The Escape*, *The Alcoholics*, and the two adaptations of Imre Kertész' novel *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* (*Long Friday* and *The Unborn*) were conceived within the theme of imprisonment. His protagonists are prisoners of life and existence, the living dead imprisoned in human bodies, who scene by scene question the indecipherable, unnamable, and invisible, thus proving its existence. Visky successfully combines Beckettian dramaturgy with the stories of the Gospels or Alain Badiou's philosophy of the subject. Infused with the absurd comedy of a grotesque worldview, universal questions of existence are expressed with personal, irreducibly singular human reflections. Visky's texts are not story-based but focus on the eternal question of redemption and redeemability. His pieces are vertically constructed, like a spiral around the same question at ever higher levels. His plays are often called essay pieces, but for me, finding the Beckett key is the trick for unlocking the staging of his texts.

Sándor Nagy. B. , the director's assistant for *A szökés* (*The Escape*), produced at the Tompa Miklós Company of the National Theater in Târgu-Mureș in in 2005, records in his performance notebook the questions asked by the creative team about Visky's text:

> "*Can these prisoners be ridiculous? [...] They [the creative team] dissected the question of where the characters wanted to escape to, where can they escape to? Can they become free in their dreams? Are they looking for a meaningful life? Are they looking for answers? The safety of consciousness? God? Where can one find meaning in life? One thing is certain – they are searching, and this search keeps them alive in their incarceration. And in escaping they hope to find their way out […] But is it possible to escape? And to where? Visky's barrack dramaturgy is built on the logic of holocaust literature. Outside the prison there are new prisons, there is no way out, there is no out, there is only God, who is absent or nowhere to be found. Looking for God, being in active dialogue with God, keeps all prisoners alive. This brings us back to the original question, which was inscrutable, or rather, which offered several solutions.*"[9]

When personal testimonies of horrific, tragic events are turned into poetry, the resulting theatrical performance will be sensitive and multi-layered. When an author willingly exposes their autobiographical trauma, the responsibility they assume for narrating their lived past may simultaneously feel like both a burden and a privilege. The weight and levity of this responsibility may be found in *Porn* by András Visky,

[9] Sándor Nagy B. : Performance diary, *The Escape*, directed by Éva Patkó, National Theater Târgu-Mures 2005, Entry: Monday, 29th of august 2005, unpublished.

which talks about a true story that occurred in the author's family. The title of the play later became *Porn: The Story of My Wife*.

The play was produced on stage for the first time at Theatre Y in Chicago, USA, November 2012. This production marked the English world premiere of the play. Translated into English by Ailisha O'Sullivan and Erzsébet Daray, the play was titled *PORN: 1989. A Butterfly*.[10] The title *Porn* reflects on the political pornography practiced during the Communist regime in Romania. It is enough to recall the images of communist dictators kissing other dictators lip-to-lip as an icon of this absurdity (the most excessive and famous "fraternal" kiss was shared between the Soviet Leonid Brezhnev and the East German leader Erich Honecker). But the pornography in which Visky is most interested is the voyeuristic perversion of love and intimacy conducted by the Secret Service (Securitate), who spied on and exploited the romantic and sexual lives of Romanians.

Within the play, "Porn" is the codename given to an actress who performs for street children, whom the Secret Service has kept under surveillance. We never learn her real name, though her artless, plucky, and effervescent spirit shows us that the woman is entirely incongruent with her behind the dehumanizing name. When she haplessly falls in love with the wrong man – the son of a Secret Service Chief Officer – she becomes a priority target of the government. Though their love transcends all worldly cynicism, the man's somber "suicide" tragically ends their unlikely love story. Reading between the lines of Visky's text, it's clear that suicide is a mere canard for the elimination of the affair's threat of a political scandal – the homicides committed

[10] Theatre Y, Chicago. *Porn (1989. A butterfly)* by András Visky, translated by Ailisha O'Sullivan, directed by Éva Patkó, featuring Melissa Lorraine, Ezra Colon, Evan Hill and Stanley.
More information on the official website: https://www.theatre-y.com/porn-1898-a-butterfly

by the Secret Service forces were often disguised as suicides. "Porn," pregnant with the fruit of their love, soon goes into an emergency delivery. Their child, however, is never born, as the hospital employees are prevented from helping the desperate woman by higher authorities, thus killing off the last evidence of the couple's illicit love story.

Exercise: Relate your morning prior to leaving your home, using open and closed gestures in alternation. In open gestures the arms, legs, chest, mouth, the whole body is in an expanded position, you can do this with only arms, add more body parts, add open sound to it, etc. In closed gestures, the body contracts in on itself, again with different body parts, the limbs, the mouth, the stomach, etc. Make a clear change between the open and closed gestures and make sure not to illustrate. The body language will become dynamic, and humor will appear. Connect the gestures to the thoughts and feelings connected to your morning story.
You can play a lot with the intensity, the amplitude of your movements, with small and big gestures, with stillness and continuous movements. Ideal exercise for monologue building and nonverbal assignments.

As a child, Visky experienced life in a Romanian labor camp[11]. After his family's release until the fall of the Iron Curtain, he and his family were kept under Secret Service observation. When he became a writer, his poems were scarcely allowed for publishing. He keeps vivid memories of

[11] The author wrote these experiences in detailed narration his 2022 novel: *Kitelepítés (Deportaion)* Jelenkor Publishing, Budapest.

the communist regime's Secret Service methods, who surveilled people's most intimate moments, even listening in to their sexual lives. Bugs put into the telephones or microphones hidden in different spaces of the apartment were the most known methods. The most effective spy tools, however, were the reports given by secret agents, some forcibly or voluntarily lured into service of the state. Anyone could be an informant: children, siblings, parents, or other members of the extended family, neighbors, work colleagues, friends, etc. In these reports, quotidian information (like recipes exchanged with a target) appeared alongside information that could be interpreted as seditious. Since the official language of the reports was Romanian, everything – discussions in Hungarian language, for example, or forbidden book titles – was translated into Romanian, often resulting in humorous or absurd content (which we know because these dossiers have recently become accessible to the public).

Exercise: We can perform this exercise during the entire process of creating a dramatic character (preparing for a production, a rehearsal process, or a line of performances). This exercise is suggested to actors, directors, dramaturgs, etc. The fusion of the actor with the role can be observed mostly during the creation of the character. The essence of this exercise is to write a diary of the rehearsal process, it is a well-known practice. The performer of this exercise should write day by day in this diary the development of both the character's and the actor's point of view. All songs, verses that we hear or think in connection with the character should be noted here. Write down the inner monologues, the motives, the intentions of the character, invent non-existent scenes, dialogues, situations for this character. Look at reality

with the eyes of the character and write down how we see this development from the outside. Let the character write some passages of this diary, then read these through again and reflect on the content.

This exercise is perfect for getting deeper in character forming and for a better self-evaluation. The diaries are for your own development, they are personal.

In this book (chapter 3) you can read one of the director's diaries I wrote. As it was intended for public reading, I concentrated on transmitting the best I could the creation of the performance, its phases and tried to avoid personal, intimate details.

The way of speaking about personal tragedies in a postmodern theatrical environment has become an important theme of the stage. Alongside documentary works, autobiographical or autofictional performances are presented to the public. *Porn* is both biographical and autofictional. In his novel *Kitelepítés* and his play *Juliet*, Visky opens up about the details of his family's life during the communist regime. Both him and his father were interrogated by officers, multiple times. Their apartment and phones were wired, with the family knowing that their every movement and word was being surveilled: in *Porn* the lovers decide to subvert this situation by turning their wired-up sex life into a celebratory game of over-the-top noise-making – one of the most comical scenes of the play. The horrors of the hospital scenes detail real events that happened to Visky and his family.

All this true-to-life material is woven together with acute artistic intelligence and humor. Venus Zarris writes in Chicago Stage Review that "Visky's stylized visions are

impressionistic interpretations of autobiographical horrors. You are watching a historically violent reality through the surprisingly lovely filters of a poet; surprising because of the tenderness that he employs to render his harsh stories." (Zarris, 2012) In fragmentary fashion, scenes of the unfolding love story between the protagonist and her lover intertwine with scenes of secret service agents listening into their intimate lives, or scenes of doctors unable to perform a lifesaving operation as the power of the state overpowers the oath of a medic. The language of love, which is an endless love song sung to each other, is interrupted by the strict and typical language of the prevailing rulers: local officers, commanders, agents, medical workers, interrogators, etc.

American actors, obviously, have less access to the Eastern-European experience. For this reason, we started rehearsals in a small Romanian village, a setting that can be helpful in making contact with what life might have looked like in the socialist era (the aesthetics of everyday life, the old buildings, and the behavioral patterns of Romanians). The past still haunts many elements of quotidian life in Romania, so encountering its living memory just takes time and sensitive observation of its current circumstances.

When the creative team started to work on the play in the summer of 2012, the subtitle "*The Story of My Wife*" had not yet been added. We simply had the title "*Porn*": a provocation that immediately intrigues the spectator even before the performance starts, promising a titillating evening at the theater before cleverly subverting the expectations it establishes. With the subtitle added, the reader of the play and the spectator of the show will intuitively seek a link between the incongruous title and subtitle[12]. Visky, by excluding the subtitle's suggestion of personal narrative, very wisely did not reveal to us that the play drew upon elements of his own

[12] By adding a subtitle – *The Story of My Wife* – to the original title – *Porn* – the author is alluding to the novel *The Story of My Wife* by Milán Füst (1946), an important reference in Hungarian literature.

true-to-life story. Instead, he let us discover the relation of play with the reality of post-communist life. We only knew that during the communist regime there was an actress (the leading character in the play) who performed for street children in Cluj when she could no longer perform anywhere else. We also brought to the process our own recollections of the events of 1989 Romania. I was only eight years old when the dictatorship ended, but childhood memories are lively and can be relevant in the creative process of performance making. Some of the American actors with whom I collaborated were old enough to remember following the revolution as they were televised.

Approaching this play as the story of a semi-fictional character gives lots of freedom for theatrical interpretation. If we were to approach the same story knowing it expresses aspects of the life of someone whom we know personally, it would have probably paralyzed us and pushed us towards a rehearsal method where a documentary perspective would predominate, and we would lose the freedom to create any new elements inspired from the story. By protecting us from the weight and reverence that comes with attempting to honor the sufferings of another, Visky allowed us to boldly and playfully interpret the narrative as one would a fiction. A few days before the premiere, when the show was in previews, Visky visited us from Romania and revealed the subtitle of the play. Without the need to make last minute changes, this added dimension deepened the show's significance within every performer, heightening their personal investment in the stakes of its story. This gesture, of strategically deciding when and how to reveal information that otherwise might burden the creative process, was one of the most outstanding pedagogical gestures that I've encountered within my professional career.

I asked some of the actors to share their experience of personal testimony through the artistic making of the theater

performance. Leading actress and artistic director of Theatre Y, Melissa Lorraine, talks about this burden:

> *I have been working on true material because of András Visky for a long time now. With Juliet (a play also by András Visky telling the story of his mother and her seven children in the Romanian labor camp, the author being the smallest of them), the thought was almost paralyzing, and I had to forget that she was any woman besides me. Before I made the decision to produce it, I had spent months, perhaps even years trying to collect stories from anyone who would talk, images, facts. But there comes a moment when none of these things will touch the way they need to and the truth of this person is the same as the truth of any fictional character you might play.*
>
> *At the end of the day the most powerful weapon you have, to tell the truth, is the child that you were, the child who is able to believe that these events happened to you. It can sometimes hurt to deeply love the person that you play, or even worse to respect them. They must be flawed, and you must be able to play. Facts and saints obstruct both of those things at times.*
>
> *The biggest gift I receive from a play being true is the deep desire to tell it. My relationship with it as truth is most potent when I discover the play and decide it must be done. After that moment I must almost forget that it's 'true'. I reclaim my relationship to it as truth after the play is over and I begin a discussion with the audience about the facts. (Theatre Y organizes open discussions with its public after each performance!) Then again, I become a historian very determined to offer up only*

> *the truth of things. For me any other approach to autobiography is a lie. I will never have experienced the things I have not experienced. Either my imagination is powerful enough to climb in and make a new truth from my own being, or it isn't. Research is the foundation on which your imagination can dwell; you will find particular details to be extremely provocative and others incomprehensible. But everything that paralyzes you must be removed from the room.*[13]

As indicated by Lorraine's account, telling a true story on stage in a non-documentary performance obligated us to take a stand, to assume every moment, every image of what we have produced together, to take full responsibility for every word spoken. This might be true of course for every performance we produce, but in my experience, there is a meaningful difference in artistic attitude when dealing with a true story containing true events. Fiction can be changed, reality cannot. So, locating the artistic truth that we can assume and integrate into our own life and performance is the goal to be reached.

Chicago Reader's theater reviewer Tony Adler reflects on the problematic posed by the title, going even further in its interpretation:

> *Yes, the title is misleading with regard to the familiar commerce in orgasms. Yet it's apt in lots of other ways. What's really pornographic about Porn is the death-in-life Visky's heroine is forced to endure as a subject of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the Romanian communist party boss who became the*

[13] Melissa Lorraine Hill – artistic director of Theatre Y, lead actress in *Porn*, Chicago. Written confession sent via email on the 10th of December 2012.

> *unlikely focus of a Stalinesque personality cult. It's autumn, 1989; Ceaușescu will be deposed and executed by the winter solstice. But in the meantime, he's exercising all the paranoid prerogatives of a classic 20th-century despot. Porn is kept under observation by a creepy neighbor known as Skunk, whose reports to his handler increasingly paint her as a dedicated subversive rather than the creative spirit we see before us. Her lover disappeared. And when she makes the mistake of having a troubled pregnancy, she becomes the prisoner of a medical establishment such as might've been imagined by Kafka's cruder, meaner, more down-market twin."* (Adler, 2012)

Adler also questions whether exposing this as a personal story to the audience – more specifically, that the ill-fated pregnancy is the true story of the author's wife – would help an American audience comprehend the personal and historical dimensions of the work. Conversely, he asks whether this information might overdetermine the audience's reception with excessive sorrow, empathy, and pathos, thereby undermining the light, humorous touch of Visky's theatrical sensibility. It is a question that audiences attending can answer for themselves.

For the creators of the performance, this information arriving at the end of the creative process added a lot to the deepening of our artistic message. Here is what actor Evan Hill, playing the role of the above-mentioned Skunk, confessed:

> *I think that the theater is always immediately involved in a reality which is not real, and so actors grow accustomed to conceiving of reality apart from considerations of historicity or factuality. The*

actor instead is concerned with the sense of significance (or the significance of sense) within the factual, those personal, social forces within history that precipitate it – some residue of life which we could call virtual. For Marcel Proust, the virtual refers to that which is real but not actual, ideal but not abstract. The scholastics used the term virtualis to speak about potential which, as opposed to possibility, is real and immanent, yet unactualized. It is not fiction which the actor indulges in, but the unplumbed reservoir of the real, potentials of the body and the soul which dissolve the artificial boundary of possibilities he believes mark the circumference of his self. The actor frees these potentials to multiply himself and, in the aesthetic closure of the play, free of threat and consequence, to give this freedom to others. The actor, like the writer, strives toward the reconciliation of the universal and the singular, the private and the public, the known and the unknown. A possible world can sprout from the peculiar arch of an eyebrow. A writer writes in order to learn what is unknown to him about his life, to extract and dramatize those latent, unconscious, and virtual perspectives that converge around the impersonal nature of events – events endowed with some uncertain and animal meaning. It is this perspectivism, this irreducible trans-individualism of the theater, which allows the actor to move in place of another, to make someone else's confession by making their own. The writer keeps back his own secrets, intentionally or unintentionally, as does the actor; the inexhaustible asymmetry of persons and their internal landscapes, however, is not a limitation for the actor, but the condition of his creativity. Moreover, it would be entirely

> *wrongheaded to believe that a writer's confession is in any way pure – the writer is always unequal to what he has to confess, and the act of writing is his way of becoming equal to his own witness. It is only because the actor knows that the writer is not omniscient that he is free to explore those virtual forces at play in the margins of the text and that he can give witness to something nascent or unobserved within the writer and his characters.*[14]

The classics are restaged over and over again because these texts know much more than their author. They offer the possibilities for newer views of interpretation each time, giving freedom to the creators to find their own truth. *Porn* is not a classic, but beyond the author's intentions it gave our team to formulate on stage our own truth regarding the human cruelty, the unconditioned love, the betrayal, the impossibility to let go, the freedom to be found in the harshest dictatorships.

The conclusion that can be drawn is that we can approach working with a true story within a play/performance in three different ways, either separately or in combination:

1. To reproduce the story with as much detail as possible, to faithfully reconstruct the world with as much verisimilitude as the theater will permit. This was the method used by Theatre Y with the performance *Juliet* by the same András Visky, where the design and clothing of the actress were a conscious attempt to revive the author's mother on stage.
2. To incorporate the facts of a true story only in the last phase of the making of the performance, after the artistic form and interpretation has already been completed. This is the method our team used for *Porn*.

[14] Evan Hill – actor in role of Skunk in *Porn*, Theatre Y, Chicago. Written confession sent via email on the 12th of December 2015.

3. The third approach is the most encountered. Like with Hamlet or Richard the III[rd]. We know that there was a Hamlet, and a Gloucester, but since it is so far back in time, we can easily forget about it while creating the performance.

Either method would be used, it should not radically change the essence of the performance created.

2.2. Zsolt Láng's Plays Creating New Spaces[15]

Zsolt Láng's new plays, written since 2015, are focused on the implicit energies and chemistry between characters, relations which are not easy to decipher but which offer several valid interpretations – depending on the spectator's personal quest for the truth of the plays and the artist's manner of expression. And though these plays have a strong atmosphere and meticulously written characters, the text leaving out conflict and storytelling.

How to tell stories across different mediums and modes is a frequent theme of academic research: digital storytelling, storytelling in applied and community arts, folk studies, performance studies, oral history, storytelling in health and social care, etc. But what if we have a poetic contemporary play that does not aim to tell a story, but to create spaces or re-create locations that already have their own stories and histories?

Zsolt Láng's *Bartók's Piano* has this poetic way of not telling a story. The city of Satu Mare, chosen by the author as the location of the play, witnessed so many stories of collective sins – silently agreeing to twenty percent of the population being deported and executed – and of healing

[15] A shorter version of the study was first published in Symbolon Journal of Theatre Studies XVII/2016 issue nr. 31. with the title *Where Does the Piano Disappear?*
https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=705882

and celebration – like hosting Béla Bartók's concert in 1922. The atmosphere of this city is presented in the play through its inhabitants, who consciously or unconsciously carry the past with them, and the animals introduced in the drama, the stray Dog and the Jackdaw, are immortal personages of the city who witness all good and evil ever committed in this place. This timeless dimension of eternal witness, transcending finite and linear temporality, allows the play to rise above narrative causality. Its open, indeterminate approach to character and events calls its creators to interpret the implicit story behind every persona and action, without ever explicitly dictating a well-defined meaning or context of behavior. It depends on the staging, on the stylistic theatrical language chosen, if such interpretation is even needed. A director can simply supply the play of surfaces provided by Láng and allow the audience to imagine their interrelation. "...the staging has freedom to play and forces the spectator to renounce his natural laziness, his taste for tempting identification or protective distance, to reflect on what is happening within him during utterance of the text, and to favor inner mediation, free association…" (Pavis 1998, 276)

Exercise: Acting students should do this exercise. Take Hamlet's "*To be or not to be…*" monologue (Act III, Scene 1). Every student has the same text. Have the students interpret the monologue and identify a personal message of their own they wish to transmit through the text. Then, they should choose a form through which they can best transmit their personal message through the monologue, be it a rap, backwards speech, singing, or any theatrical language which will give a performative shape to the monologue. We should take care to concentrate on the personal message and emotional

> truth being communicated through the chosen form and not on the original context of the monologue. We should not build up stories in the exercise, but pay attention to the relation between text, subtext, and performance form.

In *Bartók's Piano* tension is generated by space and verbality, constructed of mosaic pieces with missing elements that wait for the spectator to find and link them. His dramaturgy is motivated by the spectator's tendency, however fragmented the play presented, to always connect the pieces into a story in pursuit of their dramatic logic. But the question remains for those who stage his work: how do we tell a story on stage that is not written as a story?

Láng's 2016 play follows Péter and his new friend Rita in a quest around the city. Péter hunts love and is hunted by love, following illusory tracks to find his dream-girl, who in exchange for his servility and absolute attention, barely notices him. Their adventure leads us into a mosaic of scenes that represent cross-sections of a small town's daily life, with new characters appearing in each scene. We encounter policemen exercising corruption at the police station, the town's leading figures conducting politics at a garden party, a godfather figure deciding on the lives of others in his office, etc. Attempting to solve the riddles of the past and the nature of their present, we see the two youngsters relating to each given situation. The author has designed their sequence of experiences such that they are completely absorbed by the unfolding events, and they are prevented from reacting to one another. Their empathy toward all other characters, including the animals, generates a silent contract of trust between them as they pursue their common quest. The lack of overt interaction or reflection about their relationship creates an uncertainty about what binds the two together,

allowing creative teams and audiences to supply an answer to this question. The technique of constantly introducing new locations, characters, and situations takes the primary attention off the two main characters, who are present in all scenes. Seventeen mosaic scenes precede the last cry of Péter, who discovers his new self when finding and losing love at the same time. It is a tragic moment, reminding us of a contemporary Romeo and Juliet scene, where the mentality of the surrounding world blinds the boy. By the time he realizes what has been lost – his only possibility to become free and live with the only person who accepts him just the way he is – the girl dies.

Aristotelian dramaturgy has grounded the history of European drama for thousands of years, characterized by a long and rigid obedience to the preeminence and unity of plot, structured logically as a temporal sequence of beginning-middle-end. Conditioned by this approach to narrative across all media, audiences find it hard to break away from this paradigm. This narrative structure was further reinforced by the linear conception of Christian temporality, constituted by a Genesis or creation (beginning), human history and its arc of redemption (middle), and Apocalypse (end). Professor Lehmann provides an illustrative example from everyday life: the sound of a clock is in fact a single sound that is repeated, but we still hear it and understand it as three different units: tick (Genesis), silence (History) and tack (Apocalypse).[16] The film director Jean Luc Godard articulates the same idea when he states that a film has "a beginning, middle, and an end but not necessarily in this same order." Goddard's theory and practice is long accepted by film artists today and is widely used in popular feature films that present a non-linear sequence of events structured as a mosaic of episodic happenings.

[16] At the workshop he held at Kortárs Drámafesztivál Műhelymunka in 2007, Budapest, Hungary.

The human mind is predisposed to create narratives, even when they are not there. If we believe in the human instinct to interpret drama/story out of everything, then mosaic-like written plays will be built into a dramatic logic by the reader or the spectator, and not necessarily by the author. I enjoy, as a spectator, when I am left with the freedom to connect the missing dots. If there is one thing I learned from professor Lehmann during his workshop on postdramatic theater, it's that the *void* will galvanize the spectator to assume the role of active participant. The void is that which the spectator fills in to find the cheese, or at least get in the direction of finding it. This linking is the pause between the tic and the tac, the pause full of tension. The void is how you can be in constant dialogue with your public and offer an invitation to participate in the creative act of the performance. This does not necessarily mean interaction, direct addressing, or other kinds of involvement techniques. It is a way to tell a story without having a written one. *Bartók's Piano* fits into this line of contemporary postdramatic dramaturgy. As the piano from the title disappears into the music, it becomes a tool to enter the space of music, in the same way the play disappears into the poetic world it creates on stage. In fact, given the text's preoccupation with music, atmosphere, the evocative indeterminacies of character and plot, and the openness of language, one might also refer to this play more specifically as a *poetic* postdramatic text. Perhaps what most distinguishes the poeticism of such work is the prioritization of aesthetic experience above overt sociopolitical formulations of contemporary issues. "It is advisable to distinguish between the poetic text (poem) and the poetic nature of a text (its "poetic" character, in the current and broadest sense of the term). As to poetry in theater, what is important is not whether a poem is being performed, but whether the text performed is highly poetic, and what consequences this poetic charge has on the theatrical performance". (Pavis 1998, 275)

Poetic postdramatic plays seldom fit outside an institutionalized producing structure, as their reception is often less predictable than dramas organized around the "known quantities" of hot-button social problematics. Outside of established theater institutions, the risk of producing such plays is much higher, as they are not built around the themes frequently targeted in applications submitted to funding and producing entities. These plays don't necessarily exclude such themes and might even address them, but the way they are written are simply not structured around these discourses and tend to engage them implicitly or obliquely. Also, the reception of the performance can be less predictable as it appeals to the sensitivity and vulnerability of the audiences and there is no tradition of attracting public to this kind of theatrical discourse. Renowned directors or theater makers, canonized authors and plays, comedies, no doubt bring in spectators, but poetical plays are less part of this list.

These poetic contemporary plays are neither an elite form of theater, accessible only to certain audiences, nor are they politically partisan. Rather than confronting their audience with clear moral or social dilemmas, or even posing clear questions to which the spectator must respond with a position, this poetic stand of postdramatic play achieves its effect through an aesthetics of resonance, implicating its audiences into an atmosphere or environment that must be navigated through the discovery of personal questions or a reformulation of predetermined social discourses The premiere of *Bartók's Piano* had a visible double-effect on its local audience. The play's faithful re-presentation of the city's current atmosphere clearly resonated with Satu Mare's residents, casting an honest, detailed, and sometimes unflattering image of the city's past and present. While some in the audience appreciated the work's ability to provoke recognition of the city in all of its multifarious aspects, others rejected the play's less-than-optimistic presentation of the city's history and climate.

I believe these plays might be one key element in getting Romanian audiences to return to the theater, as they offer very different patterns of storytelling and imagery than those utilized by film, television, news media, and digital platforms. Dramatic narrative has wandered out of theater institutions and into the mediatic jungle of daily life, yet it has strayed so far from its origins that its return to its theatrical birthplace, we can hope, may be imminent. Thomas Ostermeier pleads for culture to preserve the institution of theater as a safe haven to freely create without the pressures of commercial competition, reminding us that the stage provides an optimal place to experiment and find fresh, new formal and narrative expressions. This, in large part, can be attributed to the way in which theater's distinct brand of liveness, presence, and making that derives from its occurrence in physical space.

The relation between story and space are the base of the older Zsolt Láng plays. The characters speak differently when they move into different spaces, or when space changes around them. The story is clear, the space helps you follow it:

> *The finiteness of the space, being written within borders and the absolute perceptibility of these confines, defines the situations and the conflict. The characters must either face the continuous narrowing of the space (like in Wintergarden), or a space that becomes unnaturally bigger and wider yet keeps its confinement (like in the Crypt Game), or a force that, feeding on fear, dominates the space without ever being seen (like in Rúkbird). The author's notes describe the sizes of the space carefully and with unsparing rigor.* (Szabó 2011)

Láng's plays expand beyond the finite limits of theatrical space: there are either numerous locations (more than ten

in *Bartók's Piano* and *Anna* [2015]), or one space serves as a pretext for the metamorphoses of the characters (as in the four women of *The Makeup Room* [2017]). In his older plays, the symbolic use of space helped develop the story, while in the new plays it is rather a tool for the words to resonate.

András Visky's plays, in contrast, create spaces where one can talk to or with God. The words create a verbal space without story, as the only story (salvation) has already happened in the past and everyone waits for it to happen again. What Visky calls "barrack dramaturgy" offers an enclosed space of confinement that widens upwards, where the only relation (or non-relation) permitted within the shared space of incarceration is with God. Since there is nowhere to go, for both character and audience, linear storytelling is rendered impossible. Instead, the story we watch unfold takes place in the episodic space of memory, in which the protagonist's struggle with the past is perpetually interpreted, debated, and projected into the future. The actor who assumes the role of a Visky protagonist must free themselves from space and, like a shaman, must guide the audience on a vertical path of transcendence to escape the limits of carceral spacetime.

Working on *Bartók's Piano*[17] made me realize that the more open the space, the more you can lead the actors to be in constant relation with the space *they* are creating. The words create the context of the location, without the need to visually show it, and the spectator knows exactly where we are. With the actors we build the relation between characters and their constant relation to the space, and this produces the strong presence of the actor on stage through the infinite simplicity of bodily expression. In *The Makeup Room* the four women turn into trees at the end of the play.

[17] Nord Theater Satu-Mare, Harag György Company, world premiere: 2016. 10. 14.
https://www.harag.eu/hu/jatekrend/eloadasok.html?eloadas_id=4737

There is no movement from plot point A towards point B. There is, instead, the atmosphere of a space generated by the women, a space of the body and word where relationships unfold and old stories are told. In *Bartók's Piano* and *The Makeup Room*, tension is gathered by *space and verbality*, not dramatic conflict. The plays are constructed of mosaics with missing elements that wait for the spectator to find them and link them. The pieces are only a pretext to talk about the power of love, this being the fundamental theme of the two plays. Each play's amorous discourse, however, thickens in a final gesture that avoids language altogether: Péter's cry in *Bartók's Piano* and the women's metamorphosis into trees in *The Makeup Room* synthesize everything. So, if there is a story, it is compressed in a gesture, in the body of the actor.

Exercise: This exercise is helpful when staging scenes and establishing focus between scene partners. I recommend this exercise primarily for two person scenes. The scene is built-up piece-by-piece by the paired partners. As an example, let's say we are working on a scene between Hamlet and Ophelia. The scene is already structured, and the partners know what they do, why, and when they do it. The exercise begins only after the actors reached this phase of scene building. One of the partners starts the scene while the other one, standing still, describes what their partner does. The description is almost simultaneous, closely following what the partner does, but not anticipating it. For example: Hamlet looks at me while holding a book, closes it, and stands straight while beginning to shout. In this moment the active partner delivers his text connected to the described part with the body language and actions connected.

After this Ophelia is described and so on until they reach the end of the scene. The time of the scene is enormously expanded, every detail is observed, and the connection between the two partners within the scene grows stronger. At the feedback session following the exercise we notice what details were remembered, accentuated, or omitted. It can also be a very good study of the partner's acting choices and tendencies. It is important that the description of action is detailed and not general.

When we get used to the exercise, we can proceed to the next level, when we also offer new ideas to our partner. We could, for instance, say: "Hamlet looks at me, having a book in his hand, tears out a page from the book, eats it, and puts the book in his pocket, standing straight while shouting…" The scene will change and develop, gaining fresh and new perspectives, instigating the partners to unconditionally accept each other's offer.

It is important to describe beforehand the action, the active partner must do it only after it is told. The exercise is liberating, it gives outside perspective to our interpreted role.

Panna Adorjáni, in her essay on the inner structure of the play and its aesthetics, points out that *Bartók's Piano* breaks away from the typical Hungarian psychological realism and operates with poetic rhythm and form, and functions as an open musical score. The best example for this precise formulation are the scenes written for the Dog and the Jackdaw. Not judging or drawing conclusions, just reflecting on the actions of the city's citizens, the two animals

present a different perspective on the current state of things, expressed operatically, through a dialogue sung in human language between a dog and a bird. The play's use of fragmentation is observed by Adorjáni, who later in her writing connects the play's dots as a reader in search of its implicit story.

> *In Zsolt Láng's play, drama is rather form than genre, and this difference [...] is very important. The way the text is written and its power of creating a special world come more into view, at first glance the text does not seem theatrical, still [...] this direction is the most productive. It might be because this play [...] does not start from a supposed performance: the text and the author's notes do not foretell a way of creation; the author does not really give directions to the future creators. The play is self-identical as a textual creation and at the same time functions as a partiture, but it remains open from the standpoint of form and execution.* (Adorjáni 2016, 48-49)

As the play is written in a style where the reader/spectator must link the elements, the same structure of engagement applies for the theatermakers (actors, directors, set designers, composers, etc.): from the few instructions written, they must figure out how to tell the story suggested between the characters, the performance language, the space, the sounds, etc.

Story-less plays challenge each participant, both creators and receivers, to make up a story for the stage, as the stage cannot function without story. Lehmann's "void" is used by the author to decenter or circumambulate the play's story so that the reader/spectator and the theatermaker can co-create it.

We are used to space defining the parameters of action that are easily recognizable for the spectator. Elizabethan theater constructs space with words, which can be thought of as a *verbal space*. Tension can be achieved by the relation between the actor and this verbal space, as in the storms evoked in the language of *King Lear* or *The Tempest*. The actor plays this tension with these verbally constructed forces or entities through body and affect, and this signals the unfolding conflict. In Láng's plays the actors relate to such verbal space: a decaying town, a room where one is obliged to wait and transform, the universe of the talking tree. When the actors play this relation to the space, while advancing with the action written in the different scenes, the spectator is driven not by narrative momentum, but a direction everything leads to, a premonition of the outcome, an atmosphere being created scene by scene, the imminent ending of the performance Of course, our minds, shaped by Aristotelian thinking, will want to create a story and this is a good contract to sign with the spectator. This is also what the actor does instinctively, especially the Hungarian actor who is schooled in a theater of thought-before-action.

Visky and Láng write story-less plays in two totally different styles, but they both invite you to experience a shift of theatrical perspective. Rather than following a story – and story is always a safe partner to be with – you need to perceive the dramatic situation in different, often counterintuitive or creative, ways. With Visky you cannot avoid the relation with an absent God, and Láng leads to the discovery of the self through the ambient presence of the world.

For the world premiere of *Bartók's Piano*, the author and the director wrote a four-handed piece about the creation of the play and the performance. This piece emphasizes not only the importance of contemporary plays, but also the great possibility that theater-makers have when working on a newly written play. The author collaborates with the director in a strong and helpful relationship while making the performance.

Four-hand piece about *Bartók's Piano* [18]

Why?

AUTHOR

In 1922 Bartók held a concert in the city, this is a fact. Let us observe the historical context: first world war, personal and collective tragedies happened, the city is in a poor state of mind. And Bartók comes and gives a concert. Then, almost hundred years pass, the city is decaying and the hope for renewal is here. And hope has reason to hope. Because it is a fact: Bartók did hold a concert here. And the theater building has been renovated, that is a fact too, and the Nouveau Art Palace too, where Bartók played. And *Bartók's Piano* can be seen here…

DIRECTOR

This play can be presented anywhere in the world, still, the local people can recognize small details that make this city a homier place in the cozily renewed theater within the homeyness of the play – at least while watching the performance. The daily walks, the walls of the houses, the colored sunset of this region, the kind people are all in it.

When?

AUTHOR

Here, the past is mute, the piano sunk, the piece plays in the present. I like how it sounds: play.

[18] Published in the performance-booklet of Bartók's Piano in October 2016 by the Harag György Company of North Theater Satu-Mare, Romania.
Accessible also online: http://harag.eu/hu/eloadasok.html?eloadas_id=4737

Every scene has a real story behind it, every character is written from existing flesh and bone people (even the Dog and the Jackdaw), but what I wrote is a play, not a nostalgic reconstruction.

Director

Always now. In five years, or in twenty-five years. I would like this performance to always be valid. We create situations on stage that the all-time spectator can relate to. To deceive, to give away somebody… to suppress our affection and love… to tilt at windmills in insensitive bureaucratic offices… to live one's freedom in self-sacrifice… – these are all part of our lives.

For whom?

Author

For Szatmár, though I never call within myself the place where I grew up: Szatmár. I wanted to write something for this place, to *her*, that it matters to me.

I was four-five years old, I got sick, I had to stay home. It was tragic because the family harvest was just happening at my grandfathers. To comfort me, my mother, who stayed behind with me, played the harvest for me: she cut the clusters of grapes out of paper, and imitating the members of the family she feathered around the vines made of broomsticks and wooden spoons. This was my first theater experience. And the biggest! Not too long ago I realized that this theater was so fantastic because she played the harvest *for me*. And with her acting she showed the degree of her love.

Director

For everyone.

The open dialogue between the author and his world, particularly with the social and private worlds from which he draws subjects, ideas, and all varieties of influence, is an ongoing theme in Láng's plays. He is very transparent about the way in which authorship is a thoroughly collaborative process in which multiple subjectivities interact.

In the play *Anna* (2014), Láng focuses on the unfolding relationship between Anna and the Writer – with the dramatic twist that the Writer is simultaneously composing a play based on the events that happen with Anna. We thus get to know her in the "real time" of dramatic action, as well as through the play he is writing. This play within the play (also entitled "Anna") is then produced by a theater. The Writer attends rehearsals, has work lunches with the Director, and talks with the actors, even with the public. The two protagonists have little encounter within the Láng play: they never actually meet – having only telephone conversations – but in all the scenes this relationship is thematized and thus growing. The optimistic ending projects the possibility of their meeting, if Anna will decide to attend the premiere of the play written on her life.

A sminkszoba (*The Make Up Room* [2017]) brings together in a surprise space four women who have known each other for a very long time but have not kept contact. The author offers bits and pieces of their common past that happened during Romanian communism, leaving the spectator to piece together their life stories. Living for such a long time in constant fear, deceit, and denial, we can never be sure what degree of truth to ascribe to their discourse. Again, the play is not focused on the unity of a dramatic metanarrative, but on the relationships and situations from which narrative discourse emerges in the first place, and which are in turn affected by the performative world-making involved in the social act of storytelling. Originally written for four elderly women, the play was produced in 2017 with three aged ac-

tresses and one student actress,[19] a decision to expand and complexify the dramaturgical discourse by exploring the gap between "the silent generation" and millennials, Generation Y and Gen-Z. Láng recounts the origins of the play:

> *The text was Éva's idea: to write a text for less contracted, slightly marginalized actresses [...] Originally I wrote it for four actresses, but finally we kept three. Three dames, who once had the most ancient jobs, enter a makeup room. Several memories inspired me when writing: when Kós Anna (local television reporter and editor) invited me into her studio, and we first entered the makeup room. This moment remained strong in me. In Berlin we lived next to a brothel and my children met the "panties woman" every day, the lady who during the day stood in the display window. A warm, intimate connection developed between them: in civilian life, when shopping, she would stop and chat with them. This was also a defining experience. The performance is an anti-makeup room: you put your makeup on so that during the performance you can gradually take it off.* (Kaáli Nagy 2017)

All three plays have a central theme connecting them: the tree. As I've previously alluded to, the four women above metamorphose into different trees: a pine tree, an ash wood, a cherry tree, and a chestnut. They experience their long-lost beauty and purity through this game of transformation. In *Anna*, the Writer communicates with a Walnut Tree, one of the characters written into the play. The tree tries to understand what love could mean for people, since trees experience love in very different ways than us humans. And *Bartók's Piano* features the tree as the location where the

[19] Yorick Studio Theater, Târgu-Mureş, premiered in 2017. 11. 12.

dialogues between the Jackdaw and the Dog happen. Even Láng, whose stage directions function as a metatheatrical device within the play, confesses to the audience that even the author is not sure what kind of tree that is. It might be a plantain or ash wood tree, but the writer concludes that it may be a rusty iron tree, something that exists only in the poetry of the writer's imagination.

2.3. Back to The Absurd – The Beckettian Vision of Matei Vișniec[20]

The genre of Absurdism had already begun to wane in the 80s, as its sensibility began to lose the poignance it first possessed some thirty years prior. Despite this, Matei Vișniec reintroduced the absurd to our theaters in the 90s, resurrecting its language structures and dramatic forms. Vișniec found in it a method of provocation that allowed the theater to openly discuss the changes and fears imprinted on the Eastern European psyche by communist dictatorships. These plays talk about a reality that we all witnessed in a way or another. Vișniec is played worldwide, and especially in Romania, to this day. His plays have been presented in more than thirty countries, and in Romania he has had more than forty premieres in the last two decades.

In an interview, Vișniec recounted his life-defining experience of having to decide whether to flee dictatorial communism toward the freedom of the West, or to remain behind the Iron Curtain. At the edge of a cornfield, from which he could see the Italian seaside town of Trieste, a beacon of liberation, he hesitated: should he risk his life (and those of his family) by crossing over into a new land or should he choose to stay and refuse the gamble? He decided

[20] A longer version of this study was first published in Hungarian language in SYMBOLON, XI/2010, issue nr. 18. p. 63-73. with the title *Matei Vișniec: Visszatérés az abszurdhoz.*

to stay. (Patkó 2009, 43) Imagining this cinematic scene, we could already be in a Vișniec play. It is a dreary place where values disappear one after another and time stands still (eg, *Paparazzi or The Chronicle of an Aborted Sunrise*)[21], the edge of a pit whose depths conceal secrets (*Okay Mom, But These Guys Tell in Act Two What Happens in Act One, Pockets Full of Bread*)[22], an abandoned train station where employees don't work and trains don't run (*Rider in the Rain*)[23], a hospital where patients and nurses cannot be distinguished (*The Body of A Woman as a Battlefield in The Bosnian War* and *How to Explain The Story of Communism to Mental Patients*)[24], or a desolate waiting room where waiting is the only way of life (*Old Clown Wanted, What about the Cello?*)[25]. Wherever Vișniec takes us, we find ourselves in a liminal space rife with existential ambiguities and moral agnosticism.

2.3.1. Absurd from the beginnings to today

When discussing absurdist drama in his chapter dedicated to the Sacred theater, Peter Brook concluded that the now all-too-familiar road of the absurd had reached a dead end (Brook, 1999, 71). The genre and its philosophy of life had become tired in a society now attuned to the shock-mechanism of the form. Miklós Almási writes of the same genre-fatigue in his introductory essay to Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1967), noting that time has passed over the absurdist movement. In contrast to Esslin, Almási speaks of progressive absurd plays, a class of plays that contain a spirit of optimism or hope in the prospect of progressive social reform, as expressed in the worldviews of

[21] Original title: *Paprazzi sau Cronica unui răsărit de soare avortat*
[22] Original titles: *Bine, mamă da' ăștia povestesc în actu doi ce se-ntâmplă-n actu-ntâi* and *Buzunarul cu pâine*
[23] Original title: *Călătorul prin ploaie*
[24] Original titles: *Femeia ca un câmp de luptă în Bosnia* and *Istoria comunismului, povestită pentru bolnavii mintal*
[25] Original titles: *Angajare de clovn* and *Și cu violoncelul ce facem?*

playwrights like Brecht and Mrożek. Almási here formulates something that Esslin misses, namely that there exists a strand of absurdism that locates absurdity in the banalities and social relations that constitute man's everyday existence, rather than on a metaphysical or cosmic scale. Almási lowers the discourse of absurdity from the philosophical level to the more concrete level of practical life. Almási's criticism of Esslin via his concept of progressive absurdism argues that the shock-effects of the absurd are not only capable of rendering us aware of existence's meaninglessness but may be employed to awaken hope for a solution, a "*way out*" in Almási's formulation. This sense of idealism in Almási's essay, dating from the late 1960s, has continued to inform certain perceptions of the absurd up to the present day, including the absurdist worldview of Vișniec. But before examining Matei Vișniec's dramas, I think it is important to briefly describe the first stages of the emergence of the absurd, since they are related to the emergence of our historical present and Vișniec's writings.

In his theory of the absurd drama, Esslin lists the absurd elements of world literature from its beginnings to the present. The origins of the absurd, according to Esslin, can be located at the 1950 premiere of Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* in Paris.[26] The absurd expressed and translated into artistic form the feeling of life that was triggered and caused by the devastating effects of the Second World War and the subsequent Cold War. This *sense of life* in Almási's formulation, was the result of the combination of the unreal and the comic with fear and dread. The Western European absurd exhibited this alienated sense of life through the stripped-down individual.

[26] It is worth noting that the absurdist aesthetic could be dated as far back as the first two decades of the 1900s, with the work of German comedian Karl Valentin, one of the fountainheads and forerunners of continental absurdism. Valentin was credited by Beckett for his influence, and Brecht emphasizes in his *Messingkauf Dialogues* that his thoughts on epic dramaturgy derived from Valentin's influence.

The spirit of the absurd wasn't totally new. Esslin and Almási recall that Nietzsche had already declared "*God is dead*."[27] This radical affirmation is extensively analyzed in his previous book *The Gay Science* (1882), within his doctrine of the eternal recurrence.

> *God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?* (Nietzsche 1974, book 3, section 125)

Esslin also advances Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) as a more historically proximate source of the absurdist sensibility that ruminates on the crisis of meaninglessness in the modern world after the World Wars.

The genre has a similar history and background to Surrealism. In 1924 André Breton wanted to cause shock – and he did – with his Surrealist Manifesto. The communicative channels of the arts were clogged, words had lost their weight and power, and the public mood after the First World War needed to be shaken up. Like the Dadaist movement, the Surrealists rejected the logical, the conventional, and the safe. While Dadaism used destructive methods to deal with the devastation of war, Surrealism wielded the newly discovered powers of the unconscious and its hidden instincts in

[27] *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was first published in 1884. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 2005, Oxford University Press, transl. Graham Parkes.

new form of art[28]. The regenerative and integrative powers of the unconscious became a central element in literature and painting, summoning an associative world of desire that hovers between the boundaries of dream and reality, of consciousness and the unconscious.

> **Exercise**: I recommend this exercise to all students training in theater, it was mandatory during the age of the Renaissance. With the leadership of the teacher each student will choose a well-known theater creator artist, who speaks a well-defined coherent artistic language. No matter which field of theater-making they chose, it is important for the student to work in the creative style of the chosen artist. The exercise is done through a period of six months. It is essential not to focus on the result of this exercise; the concentration should be more on the process of creating this "copied" piece of creation. The students taking part in this exercise need to learn about the techniques, methods and style of the artist chosen to study.

World War II once again rendered artistic expression insignificant: the impossibility of survival, the horrors of death, the weapons of unimaginable destructive power, the chaos – all of this had a paralyzing effect on everyday life. But art cannot be eradicated, and this compulsion to continue the act of creation in the face of annihilation gave birth to the absurd, in much the same way that Surrealism represented a will-to-create after World War I. But World War II unlocked fresh horrors in the mind, more all-encompassing

[28] Inspired by the groundbreaking theory of Sigismund Freud first published in 1899 in his book *Dream Interpretation*.

than the violence of World War I. The dropping of atomic bombs meant the destruction of life beyond imagination and thought, the possibility of a destruction that would remove any germ of life. Adorno reflected on this impossibility to make art after Holocaust, and it in fact seemed that theater had failed to fulfill its purported civic purpose – to teach, enlighten, and improve the human condition:

> *Cultural criticism finds itself confronted with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism: writing a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that also eats into the knowledge that explains why it became impossible to write poems today. The critical spirit is no match for the absolute reification, which presupposes the progress of the spirit as one of its elements and which today seeks to absorb it completely, as long as it remains within itself in self-sufficient contemplation.* (Adorno 1967, 35)

This sense of cultural failure, impotence and paralysis made its way onto the postwar stages of Europe. This partially explains why the absurd adopted the hopelessness of waiting as one of its primary themes: the world waited for apocalypse, for either final annihilation or for the dim light of change, if change could even be considered possible anymore. Samuel Beckett's masterpiece *Waiting for Godot* (1952) elevates waiting to metaphysical levels. The play, also called an antidrama, is static: a kind of still image in which characters go nowhere and receive no resolution, salvation, or insight at the end of the play. Godot, we all know, never comes.

The characters of Beckett, Ionesco, or Jean Genet are "all too human," to borrow Nietzsche's phrase. Or one might also consider them as lowly and ignoble comic types in accordance with Aristotle's theory of character, though ripped out from their comic worlds and dropped into an existential vacuum, thus strengthening the message that the

devastation wrought in the modern world is a universal affair that has touched every last living soul. In the absurdist dramas of Eastern Europe, the social stratification of characters is more common, and can be found in the plays of Witold Gombrowitz, Sławomir Mrożek, István Örkény, and Gábor Görgey[29].

As for the major dramaturgical distinctions of the genre, Esslin identifies four features characteristic of the absurd, stressing that they often overlap:

1) Abstract theatrical effects or an embrace of "pure theater"
2) Scenes of madness
3) Verbal nonsense
4) The literature of dream and fantasy, with elements of allegory

We should also add two more:

5) The treatment of time as static, nonlinear, or cyclical
6) The constitution of character through speech acts, rather than dramatic action.

Absurdism's renewed emphasis on theater as a linguistic medium throughout the 1950s and 1960s made it possible to express the sentiments of the postwar era, often by deconstructing natural language and exploring the limits of expression. Ionesco recounts in *Fragments of a Journal* that the difficulty he had when attempting to learn English compelled him to start writing drama. The language of *The Bald Soprano*, he notes, was inspired by English grammar lessons and textbooks. Ionesco's astounding use of language mirrors European literature's process of unlearning and reassembling language out of its apparent postwar dysfunction. In the case of Beckett and Pinter (who was later labeled absurd), language's rhythms, repetitive sequences, and the poetry of broken, sputtering phrasing are key elements of the

[29] E.g., Görgey's *Jumping the Gun* (original title: *Komámasszony hol a stukker?)*

plays. Both authors place great emphasis on the silences between the lines, indicating shifts in timing and pacing such that their pieces function as musical scores with precisely structured rhythms.

Despite the fact that the artists canonized as absurdists didn't intentionally coalesce around the label and no school was formed around a coherent genre, these unmistakable tendencies were strongly present until the early 1960s, when, according to Almási, signs of the genre's fatigue could be felt. He explains that a gradual loss of interest coincided with the easing of large-scale conflicts in Europe and improved economic and social conditions. The cultural sphere, inspired by a more stable geopolitical climate, began to pursue more constructive ideas rather than ruminating on the destruction wrought by the recent past.

Exercise: This exercise was shared by Peter Brook in March 1991 at a meeting with drama-teachers in France. The essence of this exercise is being aware of our body both at the level of our intellect and at the level of our instincts, and to be able to make an inner connection between the different parts of our body. "Make a move with your right hand, let it move in any direction, really anywhere, don't think about it! Move your hand to the signal and then stop the movement at the next signal. Go on! (Everybody moves their arms) Now stay still! Now try to feel the entire gesture, feel what you are expressing at this moment! Feel the inner impression that is shown through your behavior. I look at all of you, you all accepted not wanting to willingly express anything, yet you all are expressing something. Nothing is ever neutral.

> Now let's do this exercise again, just a movement of the arm without thinking. (Everybody moves their arms) Now try to feel the connection between your hands, your arms, and your shoulder… all the way to the muscles in your eyes! Feel that everything has a meaning! Now develop your movement just a tiny bit further and stop again! (Small movement) Feel that due to this small movement something has changed in your entire expression and behavior! Thank You." (Brook 1992)

2.3.2. Vișniec's Absurdist Universe

These structural elements are present in Matei Vișniec's dramas, and he experiments with them boldly, like a linguistic chemist. Vișniec considers himself an author of literature, not of theater – of language rather than image and spectacle[30]. Vișniec was part of a group of playwrights within the Rond Point Theatre in Paris whose purpose was to foreground authors and texts in the theater since the theater of spectacle had come to predominate in the mainstream at the expense of language and text. This movement intended to inspire authors to continue writing plays in the face of countervailing trends.

Vișniec's dramatic writings shift theatrical discourse towards the word, and for this he chooses the absurd form. "History and her theatrical threat of repeating herself weigh […] heavily in […] the large-scale absurdist extravaganza of Matei Vișniec." (Gleason-Nagy 2023, 175)

Vișniec's language is dry and accessible. The poetry and humor in his texts derive from repetition, resituating phrases

[30] In the unpublished *Who Am I* (*Cine sunt eu*) Vișniec gives a self-interview recalling his writings, travels, roots and his whole life.

and ideas inside new contexts, accelerating or slowing the rhythm of speech, experimental punctuation, non-linear narrative, etc. Moving to France at the age of 31, he began to relearn the language: "French language obliged me to an interesting stylistic exercise: to express as much as possible in as few words as possible, to achieve maximum effect with minimum tools." (Patkó 2009, 44) Vișniec's texts are easy to read and, with the exception of the voluble monologues, Vișniec exercises a masterly command of language.

Thematically, Vișniec often invites us into a dialogue about the ways the legacy of communism is still present in Central and Eastern European society. Vișniec does not aim for a political discourse *per se*, but an artistic discourse that examines the mechanisms of power over ordinary people living in the wake of communist and post-communist regimes – affectively, psychologically, and socially. Rather than conducting this discourse through a realism that would demand historical fidelity, he draws upon the absurdist language of his declared masters[31]. He examines human beings in liminal situations, in states of desperate expectation, hunger, apocalypticism, or the shellshock of war. Vișniec grew up in communist Romania, wrote under its repressive influence, and his works were indexed, put under severe censorship, and literary periodicals were forbidden to publish his writings. Performances of his plays (except for a student performance in 1983) were banned before or immediately after their premiere since he refused to submit to the party and write its propaganda. Under these political pressures, he finally defected to France in 1987 and followed the events in Romania and throughout Central and Eastern Europe from afar. To this day he returns home frequently and admits to drawing inspiration from this simultaneously never-changing and ever-changing region. In Bucharest, he says, "I can walk for hours through streets where nothing has changed.

[31] In the already mentioned *Who Am I*, Vișniec enumerates his masters: Chekhov, Ionesco and Beckett.

But if I turn on the TV, it turns out that everything has changed, the Romanian language is changing, evolving... I spend a week every two or three months in Romania, constantly staggering."[32]

I have chosen three very different plays to examine how his absurdism functions relative to contemporary socio-political issues: *The Body of a Woman as a Battlefield in the Bosnian War* (known also by the title *On the Sex of the Woman - Battlefield in The Bosnian War*), *Pockets Full of Bread,* and *Paparazzi or The Chronicle of an Aborted Sunrise*. The selection criteria are the differing dramatic structures and themes, as well as my own subjective preferences.

The play *The Body of a Woman as a Battlefield in the Bosnian War*

In *The Body of a Woman…* Vișniec treats war itself as an absurd situation[33], a reality which cannot be explained, understood, or accepted, but which is inevitable and must be processed. Through the prism of war and set in a hospital, we follow two women: Dorra has lived through the unforgettable horrors of war, and Kate has come from the United States and tries to understand what happened in Bosnia. Dorra, raped by soldiers, will give birth to her child, and Kate uncovers mass grave after mass grave with her team of international monitoring professionals, becoming increasingly involved in something she has nothing to do with. These two perspectives are inherently incongruent. While Kate talks incessantly, Dorra can only remain silent. The absurdity of this situation is intensified by the author provoking us to think: the tragedies we see in the news – the numerical data of deaths, bombed houses, fenced-off towns, the extent

[32] In the unpublished *Who Am I* (*Cine sunt eu*) Vișniec gives a self-interview recalling his writings, travels, roots and his whole life.

[33] Other war-themes plays by Vișniec: *Horses in the Window* (*Caii la fereastră*), *Richard III Will Not Take Place or Scenes From The Life of Meyerhold* (*Richard al III-lea se interzice sau Scene din viața lui Meyerhold*).

of the damage, the effects on neighboring countries – all this is our tragedy as well. We cannot pretend ignorance. This play contains more data than Vișniec's other writings, while also problematizing the incompleteness of the numbers: the precise number of victims, mass executions, and the perpetrators to be held accountable remain unknown. The big question of the play surrounds the fate of a child to be born, Dorra's baby, and is addressed not only to the individual spectator but to the whole of European society: what happens to the self after it is changed by war? Vișniec addresses the danger of refusing to acknowledge war's drastic effects on the functioning of society and the relations between its citizens, and the desire to continue living in an unrealistic image of the past.

The play's medical setting also reflects on the gendered absurdity expressed in the title: in times of war, the female sex becomes a battlefield, and the battlefield of the enemy must be conquered at all costs and by whatever means, including sexual violence. Vișniec addresses the historic reality that neighbors, colleagues, and acquaintances attacked each other in each other's houses in moments of chaos, raping each other's wives, daughters, and mothers as war broke out. The play's thirty scenes revolve around the idea that you can't understand or accept this intimate violation of social trust; you can only ruminate over it and, most difficult of all, you might be able to talk about it.

In most Vișniec plays the characters have no proper names, but are named by defining actions, a relationship to an object, or by anonymity. Of Vișniec's several dozen plays only a few have proper names for characters. In *Horses in the Window*, also based on the theme of war, all male characters are called Hans (Father, Son, Husband, Messenger), referring to all men sent to die in wars, all wars ever fought and to be fought, on both sides of the conflict. There is no war without death, and no matter which side one is on, one must accept death. In contrast, the two female characters of

The Body of a Woman… have proper names, an identity and life story, emphasizing that these things happened to flesh and blood people. By personalizing their identities, Vișniec subtly touches on the question of how societies that not experienced war on their own territory have a different attitude towards war victims than societies that have had direct war experiences. This is why Kate and Dorra can only meet in Dorra's silence.

Exercise: The onnagatas of the Kabuki theater and the indigenous population of North America can walk silently on almost any surface or terrain. (Dry leaves, hard ground, etc.) Try to walk in a noiseless way, in complete silence. On its own, this task will not prove to be too difficult. After you achieve walking silently barefooted, then in socks, and finally in shoes, try to perform the same action in relation to a character (or in relation to monologues). Whenever we use this exercise (in relation to any character we are working on) we are strengthening our own body-awareness and developing our concentration skills.

The play *Pockets Full of Bread*

In the two-hander *Pockets Full of Bread*, a well – with the unknown lying in its depths, containing only more bottomless pits – is taken as the play's subject[34]. Two men wait at the rim of the well, peering into its depths, trying to find out if the dog they observe every day is still there and if it is

[34] *Pit in the Ceiling* (*Groapa din tavan*) and *Okay Mom, But These Guys Tell in Act Two What Happens in Act One (Bine mamă da' ăștia povestesc în actu doi ce se întâmplă-n actu-ntâi), plays on the same subject.*

still alive. The characters are defined by an object: The Man With the Cane and The Man With the Hat. They are allusions to Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon, openly embracing and playing on the theme of endless waiting suggested by Beckett's work. Like Vladimir and Estragon, they don't remember spending their days here. The dark abyss attracts them like a magnet as it does in other plays with similar themes. This unexplainable attraction to the dark, deep fear and dread of the well can be interpreted as a metaphor for the recent past.

The Man With the Cane and The Man With the Hat come to the outskirts of the city every day by their own decision. In the city (where there is life) they find no place for themselves, preferring to spend their days in the desolate wilderness. That these figures habitually choose to dwell here rather than in a lively urban environment emblematizes the tendency to isolate, mourn, and fixate on the grim devastations of the past. It is characteristic of post-communist European societies to be unable to escape structural tendencies and pathologies that are passed from generation to generation: the feeling of inferiority, the expectation in each situation for negative outcomes, the alertness that enables the person to fully accomplish oneself, the lack of trust in governmental systems, and the incapacity to fight or stand up for own rights and privileges. Of course, this is only one possible approach to the theme of the well. For me, as a director, it was important to approach it from the perspective the author offers throughout his work: to open a discourse on taboo, uncomfortable, painful subjects.

The play *Paparazzi or Chronicle of an Aborted Sunrise*[35]

This text explores the end of the world and the absurdity of the media's hunt for news for the next day's edition,

[35] Originally written in French language in 1996, the author translated it into Romanian in 2002.

even in times of apocalypse. The end of the world is both a biblical and a mediatized theme today. Vișniec admits that "I knew that I was writing about one of the most impossible subjects. It is difficult to take the 'end of the world' seriously. How can one approach such a subject? And still, still... I've made this piece pretty cinematic, with different characters crossing paths in a situation that characters either accept or ignore. I was also interested in seeing people in borderline situations. What people do, how they think and how they act – that's the main theme, perhaps." (Patkó 2009, 43)

The universe of the play is constructed verbally and in all manner of mediums that alternate in rapid succession: face-to-face dialogue, phone calls, television transmissions, loudspeakers, muted characters, and so on. Together with the play's multiplicity and discontinuity of spaces and locations, *Paparazzi…* functions like a cinematic play. Most of the scenes start *in media res*, leaving no time for the situations to theatrically develop, but simply dropping us to their most urgent points of conflict.

Dozens of disaster movies are released every year, less easy to approach on stage. In this play the Sun implodes, darkness falls on the Earth, and life will cease at any moment. Vișniec portrays ordinary people and explores their pettiness even in the event of a global crisis. There are twenty characters, but the author indicates that a minimum of four actors (three men, one woman) can play it. Vișniec breaks with the utopian idea that people become better when faced with death, his characters are no different from before the catastrophe. Chaos grows scene by scene, suggested by background sounds like sirens, crashes, shouting, etc. amplified over loudspeakers. But this auditory chaos is juxtaposed with the remoteness and isolation of characters placed in different situations of deterioration. In the apocalyptic atmosphere created with silences and increasingly abbreviated dialogues, we arrive at Scene 12, in which a Vending Machine – a proper character – makes noises to establish contact with its

environment. In the final moment, the author indicates the possibility that it may find someone who listens, but this remains ambiguous. By Scene 14, time has greatly accelerated during the course of the play, but now suddenly stops: three musicians play music sleepily, out of tune and out of time.

Through the absurd language of apocalypse, Vișniec invites us to reflect on our existence in today's society and our everyday choices mirrored by the decisions made by characters in a catastrophic scenario. But paradoxically, he also offers situations and language for the spectator to enjoy this environment. His plays provoke both our intellect and our senses, our spirit and our viscera. Avoiding didacticism, he does not teach, but evokes. Almási says of Ionesco that even amid the absurdity of life, his plays suggest a way out, a hope, a kind of liberation. The liberating gallows humor sets the spirit free, gives a glimpse of a possible outcome that is rather positive and less apocalyptic. Vișniec plays with humor in the same key. The mirror he shows us makes us mourn and laugh, disturbs and amuses us. Vișniec himself admits that "I write to disturb, not to comfort." (Patkó 2009, 46)

These three authors are part of a generation of artists who grew up during the communist regime in Romania and became young adults during the most difficult and fearful years behind the Iron Curtain, having to find their way to express their own freedom in grim and dark conditions. Their approaches to the recent past interested and attracted me. Though the Revolution happened when I was eight years old, my memories of the frightened and suffering people under constant censoring and surveillance are still very vivid, including my own family. Trying to understand what and how we inherited from this burdened period, how its structures eat themselves into our behaviors and how we, as a society, are still propagating the old relinquished systems, I found in these poetic texts ways to express and search for this understanding. All three authors, open to collaboration,

discourse and genuinely curious of new interpretation, gave me freedom in finding and formulating together with the creative teams, my own understanding of their plays. András Visky assisted some days at both rehearsal processes[36], giving insight and shading light on the true source-stories he reformulated in the plays. Zsolt Láng was author and dramaturg of all three performances[37] of his texts, visiting rehearsals, giving feedback to the actors, offering solutions for the directorial choices, a genuine partner in creation. All five texts were presented as world premieres, giving these plays a first introduction to the public and the creative teams an extra responsibility and excitement to be the first ones presenting them. Matei Vișniec gave full liberty to the interpretation of his texts, coming to the premieres[38] if possible and sending his full support. Looking at personal stories like in *Porn…*, or at human landscapes as a city's citizens (*Bartók's Piano*) or a bar's clientele (*Madox - Three Nights* by Vișniec), creating theatrical universes that reflect on our present infused by our past, were one of my interests. The latest work, *Bartók's Piano* I directed, reflects on the difficult path of recovery of a city and its citizens after world wars and the recent past, with a clear vision that the young generations can shape a positive way into the future.

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[36] *A szökés (The Escape)* at Tompa Miklós Company of the National Theater in Târgu-Mureș (2005) and *PORN: 1989. A butterfly)* at Theater Y, Chicago, IL (2012)

[37] *Télikert (Wintergarden)* at Figura Stúdió Theater, Gheorgheni (2006), *Bartók zongorája* (*Bartók's Piano)* at Harag György Company at North Theater in Satu-Mare (2016), *Sminkszoba (The Makeup Room)* at Yorick Studio Theater (2017)

[38] *Madox, három éjszaka (Madox, Three Nights)* radioplay at Tomcsa Sándor Theater (2010), *Paparazzi…* at Tony Bulandra Theater Târgoviște (2010), *III Richárd betiltva avagy Jelenetek Meyerhold életéből (Richard the IIIrd Forbidden or Scenes from Meyerhold's Life)* at Hungarian State Theater in Cluj (2011), *Pockets…* at Academic Laboratory of University of Arts in Târgu-Mureș (2011)

Chapter 3

Director and Actor in Partnership Reflections from a Director's Journal

The theater is not the director, the theater is the actor.

Starting from this less popular view stated once by the late director and professor Sanda Manu[39], we must look at the work of the actor without whom the work of the director would be impossible, the partner in creation without whom the director's craft could not live and breathe.

Since the innovative work of Artaud, Grotowski, and Brook the main characteristic of Eastern acting – being yourself, not wanting to become someone else (Pavis 2003, 57) – has entered the circulation of Western theater too. After the decay of Greek theater culture, this syncretistic approach to performance has re-opened the path for the transcendental to enter the world of theater again. Măniuțiu states that the immaterial realities which existed only virtually in drama can become visible and palpable through the *histrio's* assumption of self-sacrifice as the foundational mode of performance, communicated through a kind of auratic emission of energy. An important role will always be equal to the value of a distant god within the sphere of the actor's dedication, and this god will be called to life through the actor's sacrifice. (Măniuțiu 2006, 31) This *histrio* Măniuțiu refers to is defined as a creature that is in play, and it evolves in the process of the actor fusing with the dramatic role. In my conception, this *histrio* will assume a new identity because the actor is hidden, becoming invisible in the glamor of the new creature. One could even investigate the exciting parallels between the hiding or hidden god – deus absconditus

[39] Sanda Manu (1933 – 2023), director, professor at Bucharest National University of Theater and Film

– (concept used by Goldman 1964) and the hiding actor or hidden actor in these situations.

Exercise: We start with groups of four. The first two people improvise a scene, filling out its place, action, and characters. When the third person comes in, he/she proposes a new place, action and character, and the other two form a separate scene with him/her. The same happens when the fourth person comes in. After this the fourth person leaves, the three people must get back to the scene they formed in three, after this the third goes out and we get back to the original scene. The entering and leaving comes with swift changes of scenes, every scene must be continued where it was stopped before someone entering or exiting, this is the hardest part of the exercise: where exactly was I in space when the scene was interrupted, what were my exact gestures, what was the situation. The concentration is so intense to remember all these, that the body can (will) do surprising and new things.
For the easier start of the exercise, I advise the following structure:
Two people – sunbathing
Three people – working out
Four people – two couples in a coffee shop.
It can be useful to practice this exercise without using text.

The actor who becomes the *histrio* is in fact the postmodern personage which is studied in Jákfalvi's work (2001). She concludes that the personage is the creature of the reader, who mentally constructs it in the intersection

of the character formed onstage by the actor and from the personality that is written in the play by the author. "The postmodern personage is the structural element of the organizing of dramatic action, the centralization of the narrative parts. Its interpretation and/or understanding is always a process of correlation, through which we find out that its Name, Dialogue, Instruction is in relation with each other, or it contains meanings divergent from each other. With its formulated multiple identification basis the postmodern personage dissolves the faith put in the indivisible unity of the dramatic personage. The personage simultaneously represents itself and the image created on itself." (Jákfalvi 2001, 148) This in-flesh person appearing from the virtual has an equally important role as the actor that brings it to life. There is a process which happens in both directions at the same time: the actor "gives birth" to the *histrio*, fashioning this new existence with an identity, and this new reality then recreates the actor who becomes a duplicate of himself and gains a new identity through this process. By the means of self-suggestion the actor is able to relate in three ways with this *histrio*: the actor can 1) totally identify with this new personality, 2) distance themself from it, or 3) step in & out as the process goes on[40]. Professor Cojar (1998) writes about this, saying that in theater the authentic actor creates meaning by bringing the possible into the sphere of the real, actualizing the latent virtualities which lay within his polyphonic identity. The actor has an undefined number of identities, and the *histrio* calls these to life from within, through the actor's physical and psychological work. If we look at Vincent van Gogh's self-portraits, we see Van Gogh in every painting but there are different versions of his face and expressions, all differentiated variations of his identity through time. In the same way if we look at our own pictures

[40] The relation to a role through self-suggestion is discussed by Patrice Pavis in his work: Performance Analysis in the sub-chapter *The Actor's Work* (Pavis 2003)

taken in our different stages of adulthood, we come closer to understand how many identities are existent in our one real existence.

This is how we can examine, for example, the evolution of Hamlet's identity through different periods of theater history. Let us consider only a few of the Hamlets of which we have video recordings: Laurence Olivier in the 1948 film adaptation; director Robert Wilson's performance of Hamlet as a one-man show in 1994; the Lithuanian rock star Andrius Mamontovas in 1997 under the direction of Eimuntas Nekrošius; Adrian Lester from Peter Brook's 2000 production; and Lars Eidinger in Ostermeier's 2008 Hamlet. We can almost touch the emphasis of each period through the distinct interpretation of Hamlet's character offered by each performer. If Hamlet were a pop star, we could follow the evolution of pop music. In Thomas Ostermeier's memorable Schaubühne production[41], Hamlet's search for identity is pushed to the limits of insanity across an erratic experimentation with many forms that reflect the myriad ways in which our present quests after possible identities: virtual communication, transvestite, rapper, media celebrity, etc.

Exercise: This exercise is recommended for directing students. If the students' focus is on Hamlet for a semester, then the procedure of the exercise is as follows: each student chooses a scene from the play (Hamlet meeting the Ghost, Hamlet meeting Ophelia, Ophelia losing her mind, Hamlet at the grave, etc.), according to what they consider important in their own conception of a future performance. Starting from the chosen scenes, build a performance

[41] Thomas Ostermeier, artistic director of the Schaubühne Theater Berlin since 1999. In his works characters often face confusing identity problems.

of the play. Even if the performance will not get produced and presented, the exercise still can be done at the level of discussions. These kinds of exercises also help in developing a deeper knowledge of certain plays and having the concept of the play ripe with time, become more and more actual.

Despite the ways in which acting is conditioned by historical contingencies, it is also possible to conceive of recurring logical structures that are inherent to the actor's task. Professor Cojar presents such logical structures as foundational to the actor's work. Binary logic is primarily based on the *tertium non datur* principle ("the law of the excluded middle," or more literally, "no third [possibility] given"), in which each proposition must either be true or false without a third possibility, along with the laws of identity and non-contradiction. Not surprisingly, this system of classical logic derives from Aristotle, upon which previous ages of theater history have built the actor's work, as in Diderot's *Paradox of Acting*. However, professor Cojar associates the actor's work with a trivalent logical system. (Cojar 1998, 18)

Not only does acting involve the actor's identity and the identity of the character, which are identities that offer themselves to the actor's consciousness, but also implicit, subconscious identities within the actor which Cojar refers to as "prisoners." These prisoners, in need of liberation, become the third, the fourth, and the "nth" element in the polyvalent structure of theater's creative process. The actor tends to consciously build upon the traditional bivalent logical system, but without pursuing freedom for the actor's inner "prisoners" (subterranean, unconscious shadow selves), the actor's sacred madness could not become reality on stage, Cojar insists. These multiple reflections, these liberations of

other selves, are strongly related to the transcendental or, if you will, the search for identity, ecstasy, the divine, or any other name which evokes the outer limits of the self.

The more we analyze the work of the actor, the more we realize that this work – from the invisible to the visible – the harder it is to grasp how "being present on stage" can be achieved through technique, and the more impossible it is to grasp an actor's manner of being and presentation as it changes from performance to performance.

Notes of a Rehearsal Process: Finding the Identity of a Performance and the Transformation of the Director's Identity
How a Contemporary Performance Finds its Identity, and
How the Director's Identity is Affected by this Process.

The question of ***why*** we do our art might be the easiest to answer: because we can't do otherwise. But beyond the eliberating and sometimes entrapping "calling", there is the wish to communicate with our society, to reflect on its complexity (with all its anomalies and beauties), to ask questions that might not be answered automatically and what is most important to me: to celebrate our lives together and perpetually investigate through our individual and common creative processes the question *who we are*.

Prologue

Reading rehearsal diaries of actors, directors, dramaturgs, or outside watchers is a special reading experience, and you learn a lot from it. Writing rehearsal diaries has helped me immensely in the conceptual and creative process of performance-making. I started doing this as a student and director's assistant. I try to do it, but do not always succeed,

with every performance I direct. This time, I'm aiming to write day by day, to go into great detail, and to write in English (a new practice for me). During this rehearsal period, I will be trilingual: communicating in Romanian, thinking in both Hungarian and Romanian, and reflecting upon all of this in English. Switching through languages has always been a strong reality-check for me, keeping me very focused, concentrated, and open, as the different languages mean I must process in different ways.

Before starting the director's diary I would like to include the list of the creative team and cast, as I will be referring to both actor and character names in the entries that follow:

Matei Vișniec's *Paparazzi or The Chronicle of an Aborted Sunrise*
Tony Bulandra Theater, Târgoviște, Romania
November 8th 2010 – December 18th 2010

Costumes – Maria Nicola
Scenography – Karina Staicova
Director – Éva Patkó
Technical director: Cristi Ungureanu
Sound: Andrei Mihai
Lights: Andrei Casandra and Adrian Dragomir
Props: Eduard Ștefan
Video assistance: Cătălin Buzea
Video Editing: Valentin Rușanu

Cast:
Paparazzo 1 – Mircea Silaghi
The Voice Of The Boss – Sebastian Bălășoiu
The Man With The Violin Case – Costin Cambir
The Man With The Guitar Case – Radu Câmpean
The Lady Who Owns The Coffee Shop – Delia Lazăr
The Voice Of The Blind – Ștefan Ștefănescu

The Man Who Lives On The Sidewalk And Listens To Music On Earphones – Marin Grigore
The Woman With The Trumpet Case – Cosmina Lirca
The Woman Who Wants To Leave With The Train – Ioana Fărcaș
The Man Who Wants To Leave With The Train – Corneliu Jipa
The Cashier – Ana Maria Oglindă
Paparazzo 2 – Radu Câmpean
The Stranger – Cătălin Babliuc
The Barefoot Lady – Miruna Vâju
The Blind Man Who Sits In Front Of The Tv And Changes The Channels – Ștefan Ștefănescu
The Man Tied In The Bag – Corneliu Jipa
The Man To Whom Birth Meant His Breakdown – Sebastian Bălășoiu
The Waiter – Costin Cambir
The Old Lady Without A Compos – Ana Maria Oglindă
The State Functionary – Cătălin Babliuc
The Drink Vending Machine – Maria Nicola
The Dog – Dana Stângă
And Luca Silaghi (child)

Monday, November 8

I met with the actors for the second time today. I was first here in Târgoviște six weeks ago to get to know the members of the company. After passing Sinaia I found myself in completely unknown places; it was like traveling through a different country. I arrived two hours late because the handbrake broke in the car. I didn't even know if the actors were still waiting for me or if they left on their lunch break. I find it unacceptable to be late, since in the theater there is always a group of people investing their time and energy, and waiting is a waste of both. Still, this is how I ended up starting this work.

Every member of the company waited for two hours. They were all there when I arrived, and we started talking. I told them what interests me in the theater at this stage of my life. We asked each other some questions and we decided after a few minutes that we want to work together on a performance: we want to spend our next months together working on Paparazzi. I told them that right now I am interested in the inner mechanisms of theater. How do actors take the role of characters? How can they step in and out of these roles in contemporary theater? I told them that in my view we need to use all instruments to talk to the audience, to reach them with all methods: through the words and atmosphere of the play, by speaking with them, by playing among them, by asking them to step on up to the stage, etc. If the audience feels connected then they will become more than just passive viewers; they will become part of the performance, the singular and unrepeatable performance.

And I also talked about the Dog. The character of the Dog is not written in the original text, but in my conception the dog is a main character. It helps the actors and helps the viewers. Then, at a certain moment, it steps out of the costume and becomes a young woman who is part of the performance after this point. We talked about these things.

The company is very young, and this was a pleasant surprise. The performance I worked on at Tomcsa Sándor Theater in Odorheiu-Secuiesc a year and a half ago was no longer my favorite, and after a one year pause this new performance was already on its way. Before leaving for the United States for one year, I worked with my colleagues from Odorhei on this text, and we also had an invited guest from Miercurea-Ciuc. It was summer, the last rehearsal process. I skipped the part of earning the trust of the actors, since we worked very hard together that whole season. I was pushing to build the structure, to have a completed structure that we can put aside for revival when I come back. I did not pay too much attention to the bad mood that I felt in the

space, to the lack of enthusiasm, to my blind determination to finish it, to the obvious need to slow down. So, when a few actors from the numerous cast later wrote to me that they do not wish to revive the work we had done, it hit me hard thousands of kilometers away.

Now I think it is better that we did not restart that project, once someone does not want to collaborate, I find it better not to force it, even if it takes time to process the letting go of a project. Here in Târgoviște the *Paparazzi* performance can be created with brand new energies, in a new setting, language, cast and with more concentration than two years ago. It is important for me that life prevails, that the future is smiling at you, and it is not a cynical smile. The fact that we might not live does not make life any less beautiful. This crazy faith is important to me. It pierces through everything.

I can see the existence of The Dog within the whole performance, even without having an actor's face to connect to it. I know its existence and characteristics quite exactly.

Tuesday, November 9

Last night the cast was finally decided upon. The material we will work on, the meetings and discussions with the actors, the time each of the actors can invest in this production, their choice of role, the very important gut feeling – all these factors contributed to my decision. Hours and hours in front of my notebook, writing names, connecting them with lines, rewriting, reconnecting. In this process one can easily forget that we are talking about people. Every character name has an actor behind it. The casting procedure made me very tired yesterday; this is a sort of pre-genre for the performance that is not really taught anywhere. I met with all the actors in private in the large performance hall, we read some text together, and we talked about it. I didn't want to put them on the stage and make them play some

parts like I was supposed to; I just didn't feel like it. Being in the space one-on-one, it would have been unfair from my side. I asked each actor what they would prefer to play and why. Some knew exactly but most of them were open to anything. They said they are used to being given roles and not choosing or even thinking about choosing.

Today we also set the markings of the scenography with Karina, and I took down all the coverings around the stage, so I could see the actors in the space we are going to use in the performance. There are fifteen actors in the cast; I decided to do all twenty-one characters in the play with them. I sat about ten meters from the door where they walked in. We talked over the costumes again yesterday. I decided over the character of the Dog in a very short time. We are doing our first reading rehearsal this afternoon and we are also going to take a first look at the costumes and the set. It would be better to get more sleep, but I just can't. I don't like rehearsing when I'm tired. Maybe I can get some sleep during the afternoon… At the first reading rehearsal today many people were present, more than twenty together with the technical crew. We met in a small studio performance hall with no windows. I only just realized how much it matters to have a large, sunny place to start the work process in.

I was attentive to the actors, their faces, their voices. Since they got the text six weeks ago, they already knew it (most of them, anyway). The reading wasn't a *prima vista* meeting with the work-text, thus it wasn't monotone at all. I see a reason for the actors to be familiar with the text before rehearsals start at all. Even if this is not the custom in our theater tradition, I think actors start feeling the text much easier and faster, and the first reading rehearsal is already an opportunity to start a conversation about the performance and their familiarity with the text ensures that it is not only the director who is speaking. This is much more intriguing to me, since I know exactly what I want, and I will speak about it for six weeks every day anyway.

On this first reading rehearsal I did not have to talk for two hours on my own. After a short introduction in which I explained my vision and conception of the performance, we could start a real conversation about the project. One actor-couple brought their two-year-old son to the rehearsal. He was free to move around in the room. He talked to us at times, painted pictures in our texts, and sometimes he would repeat a word he heard the actors reading. I note this because in our rehearsal break I associated the freedom and joyfulness of the Dog with the character of the little boy. At the end of the rehearsal, the girl playing the Dog had found a good way to think about this character. I was glad to see this, since after seeing the casting, she first reacted in fear to the task of this character. Now she started asking questions that are miraculous to ask after only one reading rehearsal.

The character named The Man to whom Birth Meant his Breakdown will be played by the actor I spotted six weeks ago, prior to even talking to him. He read the text at our first rehearsal in a way that did not need any corrections. It is usually the second or third week of rehearsals that a text starts sounding this way. It is a fact that all members of the company say he is the "breakdown-man" in the group. It is almost like it's not the text that's been written for him; rather the other way around – the actor is "written" for the text. It is an exciting fit; let's see where this takes us in six weeks. I can hardly wait until Monday when we finally start the rehearsals.

November the 10th to 14th

We have a few days off from rehearsal. Three days were focused on another performance (we took *Nóra Reloaded* to IFESZT). It isn't just the traveling that is absolutely exhausting (Târgoviște - Arad), but the set installation started at 6 A.M. and the train the next morning left the station at

4 A.M. These days have really exhausted me. I barely found any time to work or think about *Paparazzi*.

I did some work on the first scene, and Karina showed me a few versions for the posters. I liked all the versions and we quickly chose the one that looked the best. The programming of the rehearsal schedule will be more complicated than I thought. Most members of the company live in Bucharest and are commuting from there. I spent at least three or four hours working on the Monday - Wednesday schedule (on the phone with the technical director and with Karina's help). We finally came up with a spreadsheet, which makes it easier to see which scenes can be rehearsed on which days of the week.

Monday, November 15

I was hoping I could rehearse the scenes in the order they come in the original text but, due to the actors' schedules, this proved to be impossible. We went through five scenes (Scenes 1, 7, 3, 9, and 12). Even if I cannot keep the order of the scenes in the play as we rehearse, I wish to keep at least the plot-line development of the characters. We rehearsed on the stage today, and The Voice of the Boss was already rehearsing with the microphone he will have. Since I cannot gather the whole cast for every rehearsal, we do a reading rehearsal and then do the same scenes on the stage right after.

The search process has already brought out some interesting nuances at the first rehearsal. The Voice of the Boss (Sebastian) was looking for an accent, the voice that would remind us of an overweight, XXL-sized top-dog. We were working on Mircea's scenes in the morning – Paparazzo 1 is always alone on the scene. We need to do a lot more work for his presence to fill the space, BOTH the stage and the auditorium. I haven't yet found the dedication in his voice; I don't think anyone could expect that at the first rehearsal. I

remember working with him six years ago. He suddenly just did everything I asked for. It was only a matter of giving it enough time; it was a matter of waiting and being patient.

The first day had a certain calm and thrill at the same time. The actor playing The Blind Man Who Sits in Front of the TV and Changes the Channels mentioned how he liked this relaxed, calm feeling of the rehearsals. Years ago, in other Hungarian theaters, I would get this comment as a critique and not a compliment. We all make a lot of jokes, but I am still not sure if we completely understand each other's sense of humor. This is a domain where the language barrier is still a problem. I am glad that I've been able to switch to Romanian in such a short time. I don't find it difficult to use the language. Sometimes I even laugh at my grammatical mistakes.

Very bad news was waiting for me this morning. The financial situation of the theater is so uncertain that we might have to stop rehearsing on Friday, and the premiere might get postponed. I don't like working in such conditions. The actors are now very much into the performance. It isn't fair that I can't tell them about this Friday thing. I mean, they have the right to know. It feels like I am lying to them. Why is this burden put on my shoulders? We are making great progress, and in the meantime, I don't even know what will happen on Friday.

During the five-day break, the actors had mostly learned their lines. We already have the outline of five scenes and established the main accent in these scenes. The scenes of The Man Who Lives on the Sidewalk and Listens to Music on Earphones are going the best for now; Marin perfectly feels the characteristics of this role. He worked a lot on the text on his own at home but did nothing with the movement and actions. As soon as we talked it over, his body started showing those things we talked about (we did not agree on exactly defined gestures, we rather agreed on states, feelings, and whys). I told him about several real characters living on

the streets of Berkeley and San Francisco whom I had met. One could talk with them all day long; they were willing to engage in conversation, but they weren't too pushy at all. Still, they had a feeling of rawness to them that inspired a bit of fear in me.

The scene of the Drink Vending Machine is also taking shape nicely, and I didn't take anything out of the original text, which is quite long. The moment when the character steps out of the Vending Machine box will be a beautiful spot of the performance. It can be felt that Maria loves this role. Of course, this is just the first day of rehearsals. If we go on at this pace and the set and costumes are ready in time, then we can afford to play around with more ideas and with our relationship toward the audience. We can open it up more, more, and more. It is a new experience for me that in the first few rehearsals we've found so many things that we feel we must not throw out. I never stop at what we find at first, we keep on searching, and sometimes might end up going back to the first discovery, but the chemistry in some of the *Paparazzi* rehearsals pushes us towards accepting that we *are* able to find what we need as we are present and attentive to each other. All this, yes – *if* we don't have to stop on Friday. If we stop, then the great momentum is gone. Then we will have to reorganize life, the schedule, everything. I certainly don't want to have to postpone until January. If this is the case, I wish we would have started the whole project later in the first place.

Tuesday, November 16

The actual theater company I got invited to, formed around a month ago due to the merger of two companies, the Bulandra company and the puppetry team. Today it was interesting to see how scene partners are getting used to each other's presence on stage. When I was doing the casting, it wasn't my intent to mix the two companies, but in most of

the scenes it turned out to be this way. In the improvisations they can surprise each other, and even me, with many new ideas. It is the second day of rehearsals and I can see that they are used to two different acting styles. One is more open and flexible, the other is more interpretive and illustrative. We need to get rid of the latter in our production.

The character of The Lady Who Owns the Coffee Shop went like a charm today. We were partners on stage some years ago when she was a graduate and I was in my first year of my directing studies. I remember her gestures from that comedy play, the mix of vulnerability and intensity in her movement. With this role we can already start working on small details. These kinds of things could not happen in a naturalist/realist performance. The form of the character is very strong from the beginning and the structure of the scene is well-defined. This is what needs to be filled with content, and the actor must dig deep. The Lady Who Owns the Coffee Shop, for example, works with open gestures (arms wide open, waist moving, long steps, stretched back) and with sudden changes of rhythm (fast and loud diction, slow motion, and slow reaction). This form needs to fill and sustain the two scenes The Lady Who Owns the Coffee Shop has.

We are rehearsing the arc of a character's trajectory in the play, to see where a character comes from and where they go. But in this genre, the "From where to where?" isn't necessarily a valid question. It is rather the "How?" and the continuous development of this "How?" that is important. It still seems odd to me that a character of a play just disappears and reappears only at the very end for the applause (in our performance I want to bring back all the characters at once in the closing scene). The Lady Who Owns the Coffee Shop disappears after the sixth scene and we wait for her to reappear after a while. It seems like it isn't enough for her to reappear only at the very end, but I don't want to change the existing text.

I did not cut anything from the text. This will be a performance that is faithful to the original text. The eleventh scene works quite well, just as I have imagined it. The whole thing happens in the auditorium among the viewers, with a minimum use of gestures, so the power of the text can be developed. Several actors came in today to watch the rehearsal. We shared good laughs during the scene. Sebastian and Miruna bring excellent energy to this one. We will still polish it at the end, we will look at every single word spoken but we are on the right track, and the humor is definitely there.

This play, *Paparazzi*, is a Romanian text. I mean that it looks like it is written exactly for this kind of acting, it just automatically works. It's not like it wouldn't work in any other theater environment, but the actors (and others involved too) immediately connected to its humor, its world. By the way, I like that the technical personnel (sound and lights) are in the rehearsals too, even if another week has to pass before I can give them any work. But they are already here; we are already analyzing possible variations, solutions. All in all, it is good this way. I wish this was the custom in Hungarian theaters as well. During the afternoon rehearsal Karina rethought the set. We had several talks about it before rehearsals started and she now understands why I didn't "like" the form. The idea itself was brilliant, of course. And now the form is brilliant as well.

Everyone is so dedicated and so excited about the performance; we all realized it is simply impossible for the production to stop now. And this is the moment when the director of the theater informs me that they were able to find funds, and the production of the set and costumes can start. We are not stopping. Before the morning rehearsal I got a call from HR to inform me that our performance of *Nóra Reloaded* was nominated for best performance and best actress at the Arad festival. I was glad to hear it. I hope this will help the performance being played because there is con-

tinued interest. The audience wants it, and they should take it to as many places as possible.

Wednesday, November 17

We rehearsed only half of the day today, since there is a performance in the studio hall and they are rehearsing for that production. We were looking at the storyline of Paparazzo 2, from his excitement towards work to falling in love. The two characters played by Radu (Paparazzo 2 and The Man with the Guitar Case) have slight similarities, so we will have to emphasize the formal differences. I am still thinking about what these could be, since in both cases we are willingly showing the actor on stage together with the character played. All other actors playing two characters have completely different roles. In their case, the form resolves the problem. I am starting to think that the solution might be to *not* emphasize an artificial difference between the two characters. The situation and the text help us make the difference. We will see tomorrow. We will try several solutions.

The train station scene (Scene 5) is starting to get its final shape, too. It is a remarkably well written scene. We clarified the intentions and the "Whys?" in this scene, and then we went through it four times. The actors brought ideas and nuances. This shows me how much work there is still to be done. The premiere is one month from today. Today I was reassured in my conviction that the workspace of the theater (stage, auditorium, attic, scales, racks, etc.) can provide this project with a lot of energy. I am also thinking about how the audience will receive this performance. I don't know the theatergoers here, but from what the actors have been telling me I know that they usually play in front of full houses. This young audience (the city of Târgoviște has had a theater only for the last ten years) likes basically anything, they tell me. This is not too encouraging, but it

is not my main concern either. The performance must be good: this is my main concern. And if it is good, then sooner or later the audience will love it too.

The actors seem to have a good feel for the artistic language of the performance. We talk to the audience, we talk to the partner on stage, we talk to ourselves, or all three at the same time. These switches in address were immediately understood by most of the actors involved, and it is a language that they all possess. And this became the language that the set speaks as well. We have set elements that gain shape in front of us and then disappear the same way, the magic of which can be witnessed on an open stage since the actors are building and deconstructing it continuously.

Thursday, November 18

We have an ideal situation where we can continuously have rehearsals on stage. But starting tomorrow we will have to use a rehearsal room until Sunday. This situation allowed us to put most of the scenes on stage and in the auditorium very quickly. We still couldn't begin working on the two parts of Scene 10 because some actors could not be present at the rehearsals. We started working on Scene 4 for the first time today – it seems to be the least well-written scene in the entire play. I don't know why, but I was afraid of this scene. We built it around the character being exhausted and sleepy. The scene itself looks good, but compared to the others it isn't strong enough. Plus, it follows a very vivid and strong Scene 3.

We have connected the first two scenes. During the first scene, the actors are warming up on the stage. We tried this for the first time today with the actors present. For now, all the actors are only marking the warmup procedures instead of actually doing them, but I didn't say anything: I hope this will take real shape slowly. If I try to hurry it up, it will feel like a strong instruction and I want to avoid that as much

as possible. Waiting for the audience must be a natural and personal process. You wait for the people you will play for.

We also worked on the scenes of The Barefoot Lady. But because the character sings the text instead of speaking, it is harder to proceed. Maybe it would have been better if we started working on the text in speech and later switched to singing. But we started it with singing and we will continue this way. I need to believe that the character can only speak by singing. This is what we were working on.

There is a huge difference between the questioning actor and the executing actor. In this group most of them come from the latter category, but slowly questions start to emerge as well. I love when actors ask questions. It helps to shape the nuances. Throughout every rehearsal I tell the actors that if anyone has questions or observations, please share (this practice is not the custom here). Giving feedback is a missing procedure in our cultures. But after a week I start to see the results: the actors start asking questions and we start having rich discussions about the performance. After coming back from the US, I started systematically inserting questions and reflections into the rehearsals. I asked the actors questions before, but maybe not in such an organized manner. A structure for feedback gives confidence that you always have the possibility to react. You don't have to be on guard if you want to talk. You are given a safe space to do that. Not everyone can or wants to talk at first. But a daily routine of discussion, over time, creates confidence for everyone to speak up eventually. I read somewhere that the director is guided by the questions actors ask, and not by the answers the director gives. I agree deeply.

I hope we will soon have debates as well with the actors of *Paparazzi*. It is good if we can convince each other of our ideas, and the creative relationship is not only one-sided.

Friday, November 19

We started today by planning for a short rehearsal but ended up working until late at night. We worked again on the scenes of The Man who Lives on the Sidewalk and a bit on the fourth scene. Today's rehearsal was a breakthrough, in the sense that the partners started hearing each other and listening to each other. This way we could do a lot of fine tuning on the accents of Scenes 9 and 12.

The absurdity of a human being having a conversation with a vending machine finally became reality. It feels real. In the theater building's hallway there is a coffee vending machine, and we stopped in front of it several times thinking what it would be like if it started talking. As soon as someone imagines themselves in this situation (no matter how impossible it may seem), the scene can be approached at a different level. When the actor who plays the Vending Machine, the soul of this machine, steps out of the machine with a wireless microphone in hand, it is a beautiful moment. It is so simple and so shocking. Vișniec did not write this into the play, but the scene is so well-written that it was clear to me that it needed more presence and tension. This scene brings back an image from the Scene 9, where The Blind Man Who Sits in the Armchair and The Man who is Living on the Sidewalk is sitting at his feet; here The Vending Machine sits at the feet of the Man Who Lives on the Sidewalk. I find these parallels important in my composition of the performance. The ninth scene brings the parable of the prodigal son to mind, but of course with the special humor Vișniec has.

We also prepared the most important moment of Scene 9. This is where we are right now: The Blind Man suddenly looks into the eyes of The Man Who Lives on the Sidewalk and their eyes meet. Mr. Ștefănescu brings new nuances to

almost every rehearsal; he is the Gandalf[42] of the company. I see him in a similar way to the late Senkálszky Endre in Cluj, whom I worked with on a radio-theater production. He does not have demands, he's always punctual and well-prepared, and his mere outlook emanates calmness. The Voice of the Blind Man (in fact, The Blind Man) drives all the telephone scenes. It doesn't even stand out that we don't see a person behind the voice.

I met with the local audience today. I went and watched the local production of *Chicken Head*[43]. It was a mixed audience, but they all paid attention and were grateful for the smallest acting of the performers. I think this is generally characteristic of Romanian audiences. They leave their prejudices out of the auditoriums and performance halls. Even if the long-standing ovations and the loud bravos at the end of a weaker performance seem excessive, it still is better than an audience that can no longer be enthusiastic about anything. We will not have any problems with the audience (I was a bit worried about this aspect). The actors will carry the performance and these audience members love their actors.

Saturday, November 20

For the first time we worked on the beginning of Scene 10. The scene is very long, so I divided it into two parts and we'll have the intermission in that spot if the performance exceeds two hours. If it does not run long (which I am almost certain of), we will not have intermission.

The Man Tied in the Bag needs to employ restraint in his acting, since the visual aspect of the bag and the grunting coming from it will compose a strong presence on the stage. There is no use in putting even more into it. Of course,

[42] Gandalf is the White Wizard in Tolkien's trilogy: The Lord of the Rings, he keeps together the Fellowship of the Ring.

[43] *Chicken Head* is a contemporary Hungarian play written by György Spiró in 1985. Its original title is *Csirkefej*.

everything is too much at the first rehearsal, but Puiu is inclined to play extra on this one. The boys loved the kicking part. There was such thick dust in the air at this scene that we all started coughing.

The Man to Whom Birth Meant His Breakdown plays like this character was specially created and written for him, and he feels the surrounding situations well, too. A free and natural existence on stage – this is what is not uniform yet. Some actors get it, feel it; others are still trying to illustrate and tell stories on stage. I need to make this more unified with exercises, improvisations, and mostly patience.

There is a difference between being tired and showing or playing that I am tired. I can see that this might be an issue of self-confidence as well. In today's scene these were two strongly different approaches: one actor simply exists, pays attention, and reacts in the most natural way possible; the other has the urge to speak, react, move. This is not only a matter of the actors' character, but also a matter of schooling. One actor acts out of instinct; the other actor thinks it all through before anything else. I believe in the latter, because I've mostly worked with those actors to this point, but I don't think one is better and the other is worse. In our cast we have one of these instinctive actors. While playing, I get the impression that everything is thought through: all motions are well prepared, he executes with precision. But later he tells me he doesn't know what he just did, and that he can't repeat it.

We also worked on Scene 5. The Man who Wants to Leave with the Train is like a bouncing ball between the two women. We purposefully use a large playing space for this scene to show that the man must walk a long, difficult distance from woman to woman. In this scene the man will finally make his very first independent decision. It will be a beautiful moment: on the last day of the world, two people – who do not match in any way and come from totally different worlds – will finally meet. In the same scene we have

a breakup and a meet-up. Ioana goes through an interesting change. She wears large dresses and her hair is all combed up. She plays an elegant woman looking for men. I asked her to come to the rehearsals wearing clothes similar to the final costumes. She was wearing a rose in her hair today. She is a blooming woman. It is a joy to see her.

Sunday, November 21

We worked on Scene 11. It was great to see it working. We also started working on the lights between two rehearsals. The Waiter's character is also starting to take shape. We took out a lot of the acting he was doing and the simplicity we arrived at makes it captivating and believable at the same time. I hope Costin can believe in it too; he still wants to add more and more to this character right now. The first scene, however, doesn't seem to develop in any direction, even though it should ground the feeling of the end of the world and the madness of the situation. We will go over it tomorrow, too. We need to get close to the feeling of 1989[44] and I still don't see how we can get there. This scene will set the tone of the performance, the first impression of it. This first scene is in fact a monologue since The Voice of the Boss is only present in the loudspeakers. Let's see how it goes.

The actors who had rehearsals today were all present in the first scene. At the beginning of the performance the actors are doing warm-up exercises, all of them preparing for their characters. For now, everyone is still only pretending to be warming up. This kind of existence is what interests me now. The actor is preparing for the performance in front of the audience, but at the same time this will inevitably be a part of the performance as well. I am glad that the actors like this searching process; they are involved in this opening toward the audience, toward us. I reformulated the singing parts of The Barefoot Lady. It became much more human

[44] The year when the Communist regime ended in Romania.

and it is not as wild as our first rehearsal. We still need to deepen the tragedy of this woman – a wealthy, popular lady – who can finally be free once in her life, at the end of the world.

Monday, November 22

It's hard for me to imagine rehearsing this performance in small rehearsal rooms and then putting it on the big stage. From the beginning, we've been rehearsing in the actual space of the performance. I consider it a luxury to be able to do this. This is an empty period for the theater's programming. There are no other productions running parallel to ours, so the stage is available just for us.

The scenes of The Man who Lives on the Sidewalk are great. These parts are much further along than so many other scenes. We need to elevate the other parts of the performance to the same level. I can feel the pressure of time now. Most of the scenes are standing on their own two feet and the real work is about to begin. The first scene still doesn't want to kick in. It is not strong enough and it doesn't have any balls yet. We should feel the heat of the end of the world from behind every word in that monologue, but there is no heat. There is mild warmth at best. Of course, it may still help when all the actors are on stage in this scene (the warm-up act) but this will not strengthen the monologue itself. The scene of The Vending Machine must be the high point of the performance, and that scene is moving in the right direction. Plus, it follows a pretty strong scene.

The Dog arrived today. I did not call Dana the first week since I wanted to be able to show her what she is stepping into. I know what she's doing in most of the scenes but not in Scene 11. When we went through it again today, I saw Dana on the stage and I immediately knew what she should do. I like her presence on the stage, the way she feels what she should do in every scene, and how much. In Scene 1

she gets the performance going by drawing. In Scene 7 she shows us where The Voice of the Boss is coming from with a sign[45]. In Scene 11 she brings a flower to place in the vase of the table The Waiter has just prepared, so the table has something fresh and beautiful on the last day of humankind. The spotlight will illuminate the rose in isolation as the last sentence is spoken in the darkness: "Even the dead are expected to pay the bill." Beginning tomorrow, Dana will start drawing. She will need to get back into the state of a toddler when she would draw everywhere. Her handwriting will be visible on the costumes and every character's name will have misspellings, since if a dog could learn to write, its writing would be full of mistakes. Our Dog will be a smiling, gentle, confident person.

I now know the exact ending of the performance as well. After Scene 13, Paparazzo 2/The Man with the Guitar Case will not move away from The Barefoot Lady, and someone needs to take his position in front of the microphone. This is when The Dog steps out of the costume and becomes a young woman taking her place among the two musicians. We also agreed on the place for The Man who Lives on the Sidewalk, before the performance starts: he will sit on the ground at the entrance of the theater, like a homeless person and watch the audience entering. He will start the third scene from this state.

Tuesday, November 23

This morning there were issues with text memorization, so we didn't make much progress. However, we did find the meeting between The Man who Lives on the Sidewalk and The Blind Man. When The Man Who Lives on the Sidewalk tries to give him a glass to drink, The Blind Man takes off his glasses and looks into the eyes of the young man. It is

[45] In our performance The Voice of the Boss can also be understood as The Voice of God ironically, but true at the same time.

a terrible feeling when a blind man looks into your eyes and sees into your soul. I built this scene around this moment. The two lonesome men (a homeless lad and a blind gentleman) meet as in the story of the prodigal son and become friends at the beginning of the apocalypse. This idea can be found throughout the performance: the end of the world can bring something good, miracles can still happen, even if the world as we know it comes to an end.

In the fourth scene The Woman with the Trumpet Case (The Man with the Flute Case in the original text) needs sleep so badly that this gives a comic air to the scene. The musician is so sleepy and exhausted that the scene could end any second with her falling asleep. The Dog however makes sure that everything goes on as scheduled. When The Blind Man calls the public phone for the second time, The Dog picks up and takes the receiver to the sleeping girl. The fifth scene is also starting to look better. The presence of The Cashier is the strongest for now, while Ioana (The Woman Wants to Leave with the Train) is still looking for safety while walking in high-heel shoes. After the break-up moment of the married couple, right before dark, The Cashier and The Man who Wants to Leave with the Train look at each other, and the idea of the two finding each other is left unresolved. I would also like to bring in The Dog at the end of this scene (we see him on a large swing in the far background), but I am more and more convinced that this scene is strong enough on its own and that The Dog on the swing may be too early in the fifth scene. I still must think about this. On the other hand, I cannot put this swing-act of The Dog anywhere else, since in all other scenes I found the place and purpose of this character. It works well and I don't want to change it.

In the evening we were working on Scenes 3 and 12. We worked late into the night. The character of the homeless is such a strong presence and it is exactly what I am looking for. The actor and the character are melded. The

stepping in and out of the role can happen in just an instant. Marin has a great feel for this theatrical language and we enrich this scene with finer nuances at every rehearsal. We established the bases of the character and now he knows the limits, which he can move freely within. We also established the main ideas of playing with the audience and he still has a large field where he is free to improvise.

Wednesday, November 24

The actor playing The Stranger and The State Functionary finally arrived today. He seems to have fallen out of nowhere into this whole production. I was upset that he couldn't be here from the very beginning because it's not healthy for the ensemble work. Now we could finally start working on the beginning of Scene 6. At the evening rehearsal, half of the cast sat in to watch Scene 10a. I gave them the structure of the scene in a couple of words (the very beginning of the scene has been done a few days before) and we just let the scene roll. The actors were so free in their characters that we laughed in tears. I told them we will need to pass out napkins to the audience if they enjoy it as much as we did. Ana Maria's Old Lady Without a Compass was brilliant. She was hitting everyone with her purse like a real, old, bitchy lady. We should have the intermission at the end of this scene, but I decided that if we can keep the length of the performance under two hours, we will do it without intermission. The force of this scene can really build up towards the end of the performance and I am not sure if this effect would hold out with an intermission right after it.

Thursday, November 25

We went through Scene 10b for the first time today. This part has been delayed for some time, but I didn't want to work on it until I had 10a ready. This is the scene of The

Man Tied in the Bag and Paparazzo 2, the "mmm scene" (Pandolfi's mouth is stuffed, so "mmm" is all that he can say). This scene is filmed by The Dog and at a certain point the stage can be seen in a vertical position in the TV set on stage. This happens when Paparazzo 2 insists that journalists always relate stories from an objective point of view.

Today we also worked on one of the scenes of Paparazzo 1. The scene is finally starting to move. Now we have something to move on with, for which I am grateful. During this scene The Dog writes the title of the performance on the back wall of the stage, so it will remain there in front of the audience through the entire performance with huge childish letters and some spelling mistakes: PAPARAZZI OR THE CHRONICLE OF AN ABORTED SUNRISE.

Friday, November 26

This morning the Vișniec volume I translated from Romanian to Hungarian arrived by mail. It is a beautifully made book. It was a great feeling as I opened it and on the first pages there it was, the title of the first play included: *Paparazzi*. It is the first time for me to be connected to a book in this way. You are not connected to it anymore, it has left your hands, and yet it is still yours in some little way, as little as the space it needs on a shelf. Like a performance on the day of the premiere: it's not yours anymore and instead belongs to the actors and the viewers.

Changing the space had a strong effect on the rehearsal. We've worked on this performance in a large, open stage and it was a suffocating feeling to enclose this in a small, crowded room. We were only able to work on some details today. We decided on three key moments in the friendship of The Man Who Lives on the Sidewalk and The Blind Man, who initiates each interaction. At first, he addresses the homeless man as a stranger, then he recognizes him, and finally they form a friendship over shared memories. These

memories are connected to the mother of The Blind Man, who has been dead for a long time now but now reappears in these memories. The moment The Blind Man takes off his glasses and looks the young man in the eyes is not all clear yet. I think it should happen somewhere later in the scene. Here, maybe we can find out that The Dog might be the lost dog of The Man Who Lives on the Sidewalk, so nothing is lost in the end, we just think it is. We introduced The Man Tied in the Bag in Scene 12 today. This character will stay on stage for the rest of the performance as an observer. It is The Dog who positions him in the space and gives him the opportunity to stay on scene, watch the rest of the performance, and eventually take part in it – meaning that he accepts the end of the world and doesn't even want to get out of the bag anymore. He's made peace with his life. Science is not the only valid thing for him anymore.

Saturday, November 27

We continued the evening rehearsal yesterday until late in the night and we started early, but being tired was helpful this time, since we still had yesterday night's momentum. We worked on more open communication with the audience. We are touching the boundaries of open and accepted on-stage existence. I am not even sure anymore if I see the character or the actor. This is exactly how it should be. We talk of two totally different identities, while at the same time it is still the same person. This is why the two identities need to meet and create a third identity.

Today we were finally able to connect the first five scenes. There are fifteen in total (if we count 10a and 10b as two separate scenes). It seems that we can manage to keep it less than two hours and will not need an intermission. The rhythm of the separate scenes is not yet in concordance, but at least I see now where adjustments need to be made. We worked on four more scenes after the first five, and then an-

other two scenes in the evening. I amplified the erotic nature of The Barefoot Lady and this really helped Miruna. She now seems to have found the essence of the character and how to grow it.

The communication with the audience member should happen in the same register in all scenes on every occasion. Both the director's register and the actors' register have to be constant: the actors should not be playing that they are communicating with the audience but should really communicate with the audience. This is what does not work yet completely and homogeneously in all scenes. We finalized the episode of The Waiter and The Barefoot Lady. The Waiter kisses The Barefoot Lady with a passionate long kiss. This is the moment we realize that even his character has been touched by the nearing end of the world. And, of course, it is also an act of enormous humor. I want to stretch the moment of the kiss as long as possible. This scene should now be rehearsed in costumes. It is ready to be played with.

Sunday, November 28

We worked today on the monologue of The Vending Machine from the twelfth scene. The huge amount of text is rolling now. We tried a new voice today. Up until today's rehearsal, The Vending Machine was not distinct enough from the human. In a lifeless thing (I draw parallels with Pinocchio's story many times), words and thoughts are born differently. This difference was expressed today by keeping the actor's face expressionless and letting her form the words in this emptiness. A new rhythm of speech, a new voice was born. I expressly asked her to leave all sentence endings and thoughts open, to not put a spoken period at the end of her phrases. We also prolonged some of the vowels in certain words. She holds the microphone in an awkward position; it is like her hand is a microphone stand. The emotionless facial expression brings Maria's eyes out a bit. By the end of

the rehearsal her body was tired. She had muscular cramps and the hand she used to hold the microphone was completely exhausted. The moment of stepping out became even more powerful because the curious voice we've worked on is complimented by this totally surprising face.

We also worked on the sleepiness of The Girl with the Trumpet. The central point of her body will be her heavy head. She is constantly led by its falling weight, as if she can't wait to lay her head down for sleep or to lean it against something. This is why she takes the most awkward positions as she tries to sleep, while The Blind Man keeps asking question after question. Since she's playing in an open space and is not alone, because the audience is there, it is even harder for her to fall asleep in front of us. At a certain moment she asks us to remain silent. At the end, she is begging us through tears for any of us to stop the phone from ringing.

This afternoon I am going to see a studio performance. Three of our cast members are playing. I have seen two performances with our actors in it. It has been useful to see them play something totally different than what we do in our rehearsal process.

Monday, November 29

The morning rehearsal started a bit slow. Everyone was tired and in a Monday morning mood. We made small adjustments to the sixth scene, and we took a lot of pictures during it. Paparazzo 2 uses a camera and whenever we stopped, we would stand around the camera and look at the pictures from the scene. The relationship between The Stranger and The Lady Who Owns the Coffee Shop has grown. The presence of The Stranger and his shit-comments have become punctual and strong. But there is still a lot of work to do. The character of Paparazzo 2 is not coming along as I would have imagined it, and I don't know why. Everything

seems to be in place, the structure is fine, the arc is fine, and every detail seems to be in place when we talk about it, but the scene itself just doesn't sparkle. It needs something. For now, I don't know how to help this, or if I should help it at all. The presence on stage of The Man Tied in the Bag has become clear and Pandolfi looking out of the bag is a very strong image.

The most important part of today was that I finally figured out the ending of the performance, the real ending. I knew it before (The Dog stepping out of costume and joining the musicians while elements of the set disappear), but now I have that ending which is born in me from this performance and the everyday news. The actors empty the stage, taking elements of the set with them, while the only piece of music in the performance can be heard, played by everyone this time. Making music will work as a kind of madness, expressing our relation to war and to the end of the world generated by human beings. On the edge of the stage, thirteen pairs of shoes worn by actors will be lined up. Then, sudden darkness, the end. In the darkness we can see only the smiling Sun, drawn in charcoal by The Dog in the first scene. I played a lot of loud music today. We tried some saxophone over it and Delia tried playing the drums for the first time in her life. Strong, instinctive, primal, aggressive – this is what is needed. This performance does not need a refined ending. I hope many people will see this production and that the company can take it on the road too. I don't think that it will have a long life in this small town.

Tuesday, November 30

The second part of the morning rehearsal passed in a bad mood. Two actors were very late, delaying the entire rehearsal by an hour. Being late is a very big problem here. Something like this hasn't happened until today, so I was very upset. Moreover, we were supposed to work on Scene

10a which, being close to the end of the play, is so abstract and absurd that we've had good fun and laughter rehearsing it before. We made it more punctual; we focused on the details this time.

When we had lunch together, we talked about the performers. I shared how I imagine the end of the performance. I asked all of them to listen to the song *Invaders Must Die* by The Prodigy. This is the song I would like to hear at the end. By the time the afternoon break was over, the boys (Radu, Cătălin, and Marin) had learned to play the song. They called me in one of the locker-rooms on one of the breaks and performed it as a surprise. If I imagine all fifteen of them onstage in this atmosphere at the end, it gives me the shivers. I can hardly wait. We need to find a place for everyone in this musical ending, and I'm sure it will be very powerful. And out on the front edge of the stage, thirteen pairs of gray shoes.

We also worked a lot today on Miruna's Barefoot Lady, on her crying and her transition from crying to laughter. A lonesome woman, who at the end of the world wants to offer herself to everyone just to avoid being on her own. In the eighth scene, she learns how to see people differently and how to love them. I removed the singing parts and only at the end where she talks about the fields (in our case, the darkened stage) does she start singing. From here she talks only by singing through the eleventh scene.

In the evening we connected Scenes 10a through 13. I still feel that Scene 11 is a bit too long, but it will become shorter. The Waiter's kiss with The Barefoot Lady got even better and this makes the jealousy of The Man to Whom Birth Meant His Breakdown even stronger. The Lurch-like waiter[46] grabs the woman and kisses her, while The Man to Whom Birth Meant His Breakdown tries to talk to her but doesn't dare to get near her. We found the arc for the character of The Man to Whom Birth Meant His Breakdown

[46] The waiter in *The Addams Family*.

today. There were many gaps before, but it has finally found its wholeness, mostly due to a strong knowledge of the text since he rehearsed without text in hand for the first time today. With every day that passes it is more and more certain that the text should be learned as soon as possible. In the first week, this makes it possible to play, try ideas, and fly within each scene. Now the actors are beginning to believe it too, finally. It is good that they come and watch each other, and they can see the difference between those scenes where the text belongs to the actor and we can really make some progress, and those scenes where we still have text in hand, and it is almost impossible to make any further steps. It is much better that they themselves realize these facts. And I just realized that this play is one of those rare pieces from which I did not cut any text for performance.

Wednesday, December 1

This morning we finally got that piece of metal that was needed for Cosmina to be able to climb on the iron racks at the side of the stage. The Girl with the Trumpet is so sleepy she can fall down any second from the metal racks she tries to sleep on. This movement needs to be rehearsed a lot. Its comic nature rests on it being natural. More pieces of the set are getting in place. We already have the bar and the barstools. We use all of them in the sixth scene, they work perfectly. We also built the foldable design of the set.

Radu's Paparazzo 2 wasn't too good today. At the end of the rehearsal we sat down to talk about it and in ten minutes it seems that we were able to remove the obstacles that were making it hard for him over the last week. I don't think I can completely understand how this works, but suddenly it's found and it is working. The motive, the spring of action, needs to be defined in just a couple of words very clearly. The rest is all rehearsing, rehearsing, and then rehearsing some more. It's most important to accept the basic situation:

this is the end of the world. The tension of this gives birth to all these situations, but if we don't start from this reality, the scene will not work as it should. In the sixth scene this was the problem we had: theoretically we had everything, but the end-of-the-world madness was still missing.

In the evening we were working on the scenes of Paparazzo 1. Since ninety percent of his acting is with the audience members, it must be hard for him working with empty seats. Even if we have a couple of people in the auditorium at every rehearsal it still isn't the same thing, and yet his character has become stronger – the end of the world has reached him too. His text is not too helpful in this matter, but we can sort it out within his situation.

We worked until 1 A.M. on Scene 12. The change of The Vending Machine into a human being is a wonderful moment, especially when she starts speaking in a human voice. The microphone is present as an instrument of alienation, but it also represents the only way of communication. When The Man Who Lives on the Sidewalk takes the microphone out of her hand and speaks into it as a regular microphone, this sparks her transformation. In the next moment she speaks in a totally human tone, in a woman's voice. It is like Maria herself was present in front of us. It was her presence before too, but she wasn't herself (yet). During the rehearsal Marin started feeling sick, probably a low blood-sugar level due to exhaustion. He almost fainted, then he had some vitamins and some sweets, and he was well enough to work for several more hours. I wanted to stop the rehearsal, but I am glad that I let them convince me to continue. Mental and physical health is not a priority in theaters. The devotion and motivation make us forget that we have just one body and that it should be kept healthy. We're still stuck in the mentality that you must sacrifice everything for your art.

Thursday, December 2

Today we started with the twelfth scene, where we left off yesterday. The Man who Lives on the Sidewalk touches The Vending Machine, and this is *the* touch when the process of becoming a human being really starts in the metal soul of the machine. This touch will generate the machine stepping out through the open door of the enclosure. Because the technical director made a mistake of notification, I could not work on the sixth scene. Fortunately, other actors were in the auditorium who didn't have rehearsal at that time, so we could work on something else. The character of the Romanian politician is embodied by The State Functionary, this is what we finalized. This character uses the word "dignity" (*demnitate* in Romanian) many times, each time into the camera, showing us with gestures and postures what dignity looks like. It is the finest moment of lying to someone's face in the performance.

In the evening we worked on scenes 10a and 10b. The relationship between Paparazzo 2 and The Man in the Bag finally came alive, and they finally met. In the first half of the scene Paparazzo 2 doesn't even see him, The Man in the Bag is only able to say "mmm." Today was the first rehearsal of this scene when the switch from acting to playing happened, and the scene no longer feels like the narration of a text, or something that has happened in the past. This essential difference must be sensed by all actors and while we are working separately on their respective scenes, this switch happens at a different phase in every separate scene.

We also worked on the second scene, and we need to work some more on the character of The Lady who Owns the Coffee Shop. What Delia brings is good. It is what we agreed upon, but the scene has changed a lot and she must become more alive and adapt to these changes. It is true that I wasn't doing that either since I focused more on the other two male characters in that scene. Delia's presence is very

strong. She brought from the first rehearsals exactly what I asked for and this made me neglect her. Now I feel we must redo the whole thing and try to find something even better, starting from where we built the last time. According to the text she should be completely static, but in our scene she owns the entire space, she says goodbye to everything as the end of the world arrives at her doorstep, and this reveals her true nature.

The swing has arrived, it will occupy a huge area of at least six meters, and it will be like the pendulum of a clock. Tick - tack. Time has stopped but The Dog can move it forward with the help of this swinging performance. It's the antidote against halted time, against death.

Friday, December 3

When nearing the premiere, I like to go back to the table to rediscover the text. The body of the actor is full of gestures and memories of the performance-to-be, so when the actors read the text again, the meanings pop out strongly. It is important that they read the text, not tell it by heart, as they have already learnt it. So, we re-read the scenes sitting at a table and we discovered new meanings. It was very useful. The Blind Man has discovered many new nuances. He doesn't even see his partners on stage during the scenes. This is the phase when the actor (and maybe even the director) feels like they are sure about what the task is, where the accents are, but they are not too self-confident yet. Reading at the table is useful in this stage because the movements of the body are left out, but they are still alive in the actor. This brings new dynamics to the text because the actor instinctively replaces the movement with something else.

We had an in-depth analysis of the eighth scene because we found out that The Blind Man's plotline wasn't clear enough. We then immediately rehearsed this scene on stage as well to memorize the new accents of the situations.

In the eleventh scene, I changed the space and notified the actors in advance that this rehearsal will be an exercise and that we will change the setting of this scene only for the duration of the exercise. In the scene we rehearsed, the man and the woman are sitting far from each other (at two different points of the auditorium) and they have dinner together. I placed the two characters right next to each other at one table. In this setting the seduction techniques of The Barefoot Lady became amplified and very carnal. Her overexcitement became unbelievably comical. The Man's texts became faster and more articulate because he experienced the scene privately and not at ten meters distance from his partner.

Today I viewed another production of the theater that has some of our cast in it. It was a presentation of the classic *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Our Vending Machine appeared in this performance with a totally new and different face – it was like she wasn't even the same actress that I work with. This is why I intend to see the actors in other performances, because today's experience helped me to see how I could be more helpful towards her character in our production. I can see how many other things she is able to play.

After the performance, we went on rehearsing the second scene of Paparazzo 2. This character is starting to find its form. All the texts seem to find their spot and meaning, up to this day we were talking about it and now we succeeded in doing it too. He has four relationships in this scene: with The Lady who Owns the Coffee Shop, with The Voice of the Boss, with The Stranger and finally with the audience. We looked at these again to make sure that his shifts will be done clearly. We also introduced some articulations in the state of the coffee-house owner; since her part is static (she sits through the scene) it is important that her presence isn't just a general state. She follows every moment, every event, she reacts, and she uses her things according to these reactions. We worked on details today that make the scene's

rhythm more coherent. We have ten days left until the premiere and I think I have never taken the text back to the table in this phase before. From now on I would like to do it. It is like going back in our footsteps to the point that we started from. It really helps. These notes help too, it makes me put into words what functioned and what didn't – on a theoretical level. This is the level that I don't talk about in rehearsals because this is where directing instructions are born. I say instructions, not intentions. These notes can put into words the intentions as well. It takes up time to write it, especially in English. Many, many times I am so tired, but I must write it fresh (maximum one day) after the rehearsal. It is a good concentration and determination exercise, and very helpful for the personal creative process.

Saturday, December 4

It was a long day of rehearsal. We connected all the scenes together. A part of the costumes was already with us on stage, and the first accidents started to happen. A ladder fell on Puiu's knee. Fortunately, he's all right. Ana Maria fell off a chair in the darkness. Mr. Ștefănescu's car broke down on his way to rehearsal on the edge of town and he was very late for rehearsal. At the end of the evening rehearsal, I finally put together the end of the performance: fifteen actors end the performance. The elements of the set are folded back in place and become one with the stag. The space is filled by the actors – some of them play the music, the rest are exploding in dance, the front edge of the stage is filled with shoes (everybody leaves their shoes there). The music that the actors are playing fills the space loudly while the chalk-drawn sun is still smiling on the back wall of the stage. The chalk-drawn sun is still smiling even if everyone's dead, even if the world has come to an end. This is the only musical moment in the almost two-hour long performance;

it will take about three minutes. The lyrics to the song are only four lines derived from the same single line:

Invaders must die
Invaders shall die
Invaders will die
Invaders die.

In the original song only "Invaders must die" is written. With new wars emerging every year it is impossible for me not to speak of my impressions when I hear that a country is being invaded, occupied. This is the meaning and power of the lyrics. Those in the audience who do not know the original will probably not understand the words, because Cătălin is shouting them into a loudspeaker. The energy of letting it out is what's important; this is what the content of the end of the performance must be at the end of the world. Words are less important in this setting. The end of the performance will be strong and loud, and the rest of the performance needs to rise to the same standards. Starting from the tenth scene I have no worries, but before that, it's still a rollercoaster ride: part of it up (2, 3, 5, and 8), part of it down (1, 4, 6, 7, and 9). I feel that time is running out, but I also have to acknowledge that there wasn't a single day that we didn't make any progress. It is hard for me that I cannot rehearse the scenes in order. Except for today, we've been jumping forwards and backwards between scenes and we will keep doing that until Wednesday of next week. We have a large cast, there are other performances and rehearsals for those performances, and the actors have other commitments too (and all this is more than enough to let us work in a chaos).

Sunday, December 5

We were filming at a local TV station with Maria and six actors. We recorded the video materials needed for the ninth scene's TV news spot in the performance's absurd style. Since we were making music until five in the morning, rehearsing the end song and jamming a lot, we were pretty tired. But this helped them not to be nervous in front of the camera. Maria chose separate costumes for this occasion (the costumes they had at the TV station had to be very fancy and colorful compared to the gray of our on-stage costumes). Some of the actors brought their own clothes from home and then we recorded the videos needed. We made outdoor shots as well. Radu reports the end of the world with garbage and mongrel dogs in the background. It is a real local specialty. We will do the editing work on this material tomorrow.

In the afternoon we worked on Scenes 12 and 13. The structure of the twelfth scene is ready, so the two actors are now rehearsing seated in front of each other, speaking in natural tones of their voices. The Vending Machine's robotic voice is already worked out, so Maria is now looking for new emphases. For this character it is important that the emphasis is not on the text itself, rather on the emotion behind it, especially since she has a huge amount of text. It was a joy watching them rehearsing. And they could see each other again; they could look each other in the eyes, while in the real scene on stage they don't have eye-contact in the first part of the scene. Maria is handling her two assignments in the performance wonderfully, she can switch from actress to costume-designer in a professional way, she enjoys doing both very much. We have the music embedded in the third scene. The Man who Lives on the Sidewalk starts on a different tone since there is loud music playing in his earphones. The loud music goes on when he takes off his earphones and it also gives a groove to his pauses in the

text. These two scenes are the strongest now. We must push hard to have the rest come up to this level. We can rehearse those scenes almost every day. The actors made themselves available because they knew that this much time is needed for an actor to start feeling free within a scene.

Monday to Friday, December 6-10

This week was exhaustingly full. We rehearsed until late at night almost every day and the technical elements needed separate rehearsals as well. I don't ask the actors to stay longer. Some of them have children. If they cannot stay, they just let me know. But as days go by, nobody leaves at ten, when we should officially finish. Those coming from Bucharest stay in the city now. I just couldn't find time to write. I was glad if I could catch a couple of minutes of rest.

Most of us gain a lot of energy from this rehearsal process and despite the visible signs of fatigue we stay up each night to discuss the performance and everything related to it. It is such a lucky feeling that we don't already want to get away from each other. Since finishing *Nóra Reloaded* two years ago, I haven't had such an experience in a theater. This is what can keep me going for years in my work. We work without shouting and conflict. For me, this is normal. I don't understand why a director should "tear apart" the actor. Back home some of the actors I admire, more precisely actresses, told me that they enjoy and cherish those directors who torture them and leave them on the edge of nervous breakdowns. They say it's because once they are through the phase of pain and desperation, something new can come out of them, these directors can push them beyond their limits. I just can't believe this is right, though I have seen it being done while being director's assistant in different theaters. I am at the beginning of my road to becoming a director, and I've already been told by an actor in a previous work that I

am too "nice", and that's not the way to behave for a director. Such an old mentality. I wonder if we will ever heal from it.

Friday – today – was the first day off because there are performances on the weekend every day and the stage is not free. In this phase of our work, I don't want to go back to the studio hall with the rehearsals. I will travel home for two days. It will be nice to get some rest and think about the performance from a distance. Thursday at 8 P.M. – yesterday – we had our first run-through. This meant that we were setting lights all night on Wednesday with the technicians. Then I was setting lights Thursday morning scene-by-scene with the actors and then we played the whole performance in the evening. It was a tired and slow rehearsal, exactly half an hour longer than it should have been (this half an hour includes all the technical problems, the long scene changes, etc. but it is still very long). But at least we finally managed to connect all scenes, and this makes it easier to see where it needs to be shorter, and what should be cut out.

I am thinking about cutting from Scenes 4, 8, and 12 because they seem too long. The actors asked me to give these scenes another chance, so I will make the changes only on Tuesday, if needed. At the general rehearsal there were present stage-director Ana Mărgineanu and playwright Peca Ștefan together with the two directors of the theater, finally some new faces in the audience. The actors were playing with them too, I am sure that the interactive play with the viewers will bring even more energy to the scenes.

The person doing the lights was there with us from the first on-stage rehearsals, we were discussing lights with him during these rehearsals to see what was needed and where, and in theory we had set up the lighting in those two weeks. Wednesday night all light positions have been installed and targeted since Andrei knows the structure of the scenes as well. The angle of the lights, the warmth of the illumination, the match-up of the machinery, the shadings were ready relatively fast, meaning we were ready with the lights by four

in the morning. We saved a whole day of rehearsals by doing this at night. If we would have done it together with the actors, it would have taken at least two long rehearsals. I do like to do the lights separately from the rehearsals, there is more time to experiment to play around with ideas this way. For the actors it is the situation of waiting that can be the most tiring, to wait for hours only to step on stage and stay there without acting. It is also a matter of discipline obviously, but we really needed to save time here, and I am glad we did it this way.

On Wednesday we were working on separate scenes in the morning and in the afternoon too. There was a performance programmed in the studio hall, and because the walls are very thin between the two theater spaces, we could only have silent rehearsals. We were working on Scene 11 exactly, when we were asked to be more silent, so we chose to whisper throughout the scene. All gestures became much stronger this way, the body needed to become more expressive, since the words could not get too far. This is the scene that is played in its entire length in the auditorium among the audience members. The man and the woman are sitting at the same table in the original script, but in our version The Man to Whom Birth Meant his Breakdown and The Barefoot Lady are sitting at two distant points in the auditorium in the performance and they have a conversation over the dinner table in this situation. The text is abstract and fills the entire space. In our silent rehearsal the body needed to fill the space. This could also be used as an exercise, to replay a constructed scene in whispers; I am going to use this idea.

After the evening rehearsal we started to do the lights and at the same time the music rehearsal started in the entrance hall. I had to walk from one space to another. I wrote the music on a separate sheet, so the actors have the order of music as well: who enters at which beat, what kind of rhythm the kick drum follows, what are the exact verbs used in our Invaders … lyrics. The music rehearsal lasted until 3

A.M., and many of the cast just came to listen, even if they do not play an instrument. It would be ideal for everyone to have a musical moment, to handle one instrument, but I think the way we are structuring the Finale is more than OK. It would not be the best to act like we all play instruments when we do not in fact.

Wednesday night the edited TV recording arrived, we worked on it Tuesday for several hours. We watched it with the actors at least three times, because we always had to laugh. The effects I added turned out to be very comic, I am happy about it. During Mircea's part (he is announcing telephone numbers for the audience to call and the non-existent paparazzi.ro webpage) folk music can be heard, so it really became a cheesy morning TV show, it's one of the most comical parts of the recording. Ioana's part had to be OTV like (a conservative low budget TV station) and it became even more so. The interview with Professor Pandolfi did not work out as I expected so I will have to cut out from it. The material is now 4 minutes long and I want to lower it down to 3. When the public sees this on the TV, the stage is not lit, the only thing we can see is the shadow of The Blind Man and the TV set behind him.

Tuesday, between the two rehearsals we edited with Padre (Valentin Rușanu) the material recorded at the TV studio. After the evening rehearsal we worked on the music again, it is starting to sound good, I like it. Marin and Costin found the way to play together, they are really on it and Radu started to improvise on the drums, now we can start to choose what we want to keep from all this. Costin discovered a good combination that he can play, instead of just doing the riffs.

With the scenes, we worked one hour with each one, excepting Scene 9 which I pushed until it started to work. Mr. Ștefănescu first seemed to speak a different theater language, the realism that I want to erase from our performance. Now he passed over the trap of realism and found the key to be able to open in front of the audience, to open the intimacy.

Even the smallest inner vibe must be opened to the public. This is what makes the whole performance more lifted, and self-irony is unavoidable this way. I changed the opening situation of The Blind Man, so that the scene does not begin anymore in his apartment. Now he first talks to the audience, he is asking them things and so does The Man who Lives on the Sidewalk. Only after this part the actual scene starts, but until this phase the scene is opened enough to be placed in the theatrical space (the stage) and not only in a small apartment. The set does not allow illustrative realistic spaces; every scene has the set of the previous scene in it and most of the time a new element comes in. In the ninth scene The Man Who Lives on the Sidewalk uses the bar of the second and sixth scene, and this is just a small example.

Tuesday night we connected the last scenes, starting from 10a to the end. In this last part the performance is growing exponentially, the chaos and the craziness starts. And Scene 9 prepares this now very properly. Monday, we did the scenes from the first part, from one to nine and I said that in the evening we will work on the scene that was less good at this rehearsal. So, it turned out that we will need to work on Scene 6, a scene that must start from a point of full tension. If the actors begin the scene from point zero, the tension cannot grow enough and so the part between Paparazzo 2 and The Stranger will not be comical enough.

Before this week we worked on scenes separately and in all kinds of order depending on the actors' schedule. Starting from this week, meaning from Monday to this Friday we could work mainly on coherent parts of the performance, so the dynamics of the scenes evolved well as the scenes followed each other chronologically. Today I found the music piece that we use in Scene 12. The Man Who Lives on the Sidewalk gives his earphones to The Vending Machine transformed into a girl. The music is *Lascia che io pianga* by Handel, this is what the girl hears while on the stage there is

loud music and lots of movement. The music touches her so deep, that she just sits and laughs, laughs, laughs.

Sunday, December 12

I am on my way to Târgoviște on a seven-hour train ride. Knowing that I will be traveling so long, I did not want to be occupied with the performance yesterday, but of course that my brain kept ticking, the scenes rolled in front of my eyes. On the train I cut the text, some sentences from each scene, not too much. Every repetition that is not advancing the performance is left out now. Repetition is a key characteristic in the plays of Vișniec, the dramaturgy of repetition expands the time, and this advances ultimately the play. But in *Paparazzi* some of the repetitions do not necessarily fit into this dramaturgy. I started with the thought that if the performance is under two hours, I will not cut from the text. But tomorrow I will cut from the text with the actors and quicken up the pace of the scenes. Of course, it matters a lot what the shape of each scene is. Most of the cuts are from the scenes of The Blind Man, he just talks too much and always the same thing which is humorous, and I want to keep this humor side, but not the unjustified repetitions. This is not entirely Mr. Ștefănescu's fault, it is my fault too that I could not help him better. Also, I must keep reminding him and myself, that this is not about anyone being guilty, it is a process and it is normal to keep looking for the best solution. No self-shaming needed.

The fourth, the eight scenes got shorter and also the twelfth scene, the part before the appearance of The Vending Machine girl. Scenes 6 and 7 will begin a few lines later, so that we can accentuate even more that the scenes are interrupted ones, they do not begin and end in front of our eyes, we see a glimpse of them. The actors know the lines that are cut out, it is in them, so now they just cannot start from zero. I talked Thursday night about my intent to cut

from the text, so I believe there will be no big surprises; at least this is the least I want.

I also enjoyed rereading the whole text again and again, and because I already know it by heart (many times I whisper it to the actors) I do not always reread it before each scene I work on. But it is always good to reread the text, to see it and not only just to know it by heart. Tomorrow morning I leave early from Bucharest, so that we can start the rehearsal at 10 A.M. In the evening we will have a run-through again.

Monday, December 13

At night we talked a lot with Maria about The Vending Machine. She cannot think like a human, she must not want to be sympathetic. Her speech, her interminable wave of words is aggressive; she does not let time to react to what she is saying. She is not explaining because she does not understand what it means to make yourself understood. Her feelings are primordial, instinctive, and unconscious. She screams, talks fast, chokes, cries, and all this she can watch on herself, as an outsider because she does not comprehend what is happening to her. The becoming of a human cannot be conscious, it just happens, and it cannot be stopped. It is like a huge wave that washes everything, this is how the words of The Vending Machine are. The moment she wants to be comprehensible and conscious it all becomes uninteresting and untrue. We talked with Maria all night about this. At the very end of the scene, when The Barefoot Lady touches her, the machine becomes Maria, and at this point she can really ask: and now, what will happen to me now? I will be who? Yes, what can happen after we become human? The world can easily end, because we became human, and this is the utmost that can be achieved on this Earth. The ending cannot be sad this way.

In the morning we started from zero, to the big surprise of the team. We read the text, we made slight changes, and

we cut from the text. The best part was when colleagues started to hear each other's text, people who do not perform in the same scene, they do not meet on stage. New suggestions came on using this or that word, and I saw that most of the group is not used to working this much on the text, many of the group lost interest after two hours. I cut about ten minutes time out of the text, maybe we can even cut some more. The most part cut out is from Scenes 4 and 12, but also all unnecessary repetition fell out from each scene. The rhythm of the scenes must unify.

Friday night I measured two hours and 15 minutes, we need to get it down to one hour and 50 minutes, even less. I need to feel that this is the last scene the actor is playing, that this is the last play, the last words, the last performance. Starting from today the guys will have two or three music rehearsals, the ending must sound perfect, or we will have no ending at all. The music needs to fill all the space.

Tuesday, December 14

Today I planned two big rehearsals, two run-throughs. The first one was weak, without real energy, the tiredness and the late nights awake are getting the best of the actors and at the same time, this is the period of the rehearsal process, when people involved can't seem to get any sleep even if they wanted to. Myself, I can't sleep; my head is constantly locked on scenes from the performance. This kind of tiredness is good for me; it makes me more awake and sensitive to the finest nuances. At the same time, I do consider it important for everyone to know their limits, to know how many nights they can stay awake without these times taking their long-term toll on their work, because there is no sense in seeing walking ghosts on the stage at the morning rehearsals. Cosmina couldn't sleep last night, so she cooked a large meal for the entire crew. Fifteen people had a

wonderful lunch of three plates today, and it was nice eating together, existing together.

Marin's voice completely vanished today; he couldn't say half a word aloud. During the evening run-through other actors read the text for him. The third scene was read by Mr. Ștefănescu and he spoke with such instinctive power that I needed to stop the rehearsal immediately and ask for this presence in his own character in the eight scene. It is important that The Blind Man is not just an old man, but he also is a man. He is a man, who is alone, a man who has problems and powerful thoughts. He is not a simple storyteller, the end of the world is not a simple story, the end of the world is a sharp reality that cuts in the flash.

The strings of the separate scenes seem to sing in harmony now, it seems to be more connecting them than just the frightened and shaken people in the scenes and the end of the world as a shared central theme. The scenes are also connected by the relationship with the spectators, that honest relationship that leaves no space and time for intimacy. The spectator sees everything, there is no fourth wall, and there is no way of turning inwards and suffering. If we want to suffer, we need to assume it in front of the audience, this suffering needs to be said in their faces. I am convincing the actors about this every day again and again and what a great joy it is to finally see this happening.

In the fifth scene the depression of The Cashier is an open state, when she is alone, she does not turn inward, she looks at us and this makes everyone feel what she feels. There is no place for empathy, because we are not witnessing a story that is disconnected from ourselves. The scene, the end of the world is happening here and now. The character of Paparazzo 2 also finds the strange people he talks about among the members of the audience. It is not fiction or a recollection of things that happened in the past. We all are strangers and with the end of the world all our gestures and expressions become even more suspicious and dangerous.

Wednesday, December 15

Today we had only one run-through and we started it a little bit later, at 11 A.M. instead of 10 A.M. To my biggest surprise I found out that four of the actors have a performance today. I could not understand why they must be forced to step out of this process to play a performance on Wednesday, a day when this theater never has performances. However, I could work on separate scenes.

Since Monday I am writing in my text during the rehearsals so I will not forget any small detail, and we always gather after the rehearsal to discuss what and how it went, what needs to be changed, tuned etc. I also measure the time to see if any scene exceeds the time limit. Until Saturday, the premiere, I want to be able to get the performance under 120 minutes. The halfway point of the performance is right at the end of Scene 8 and today it was five minutes shorter. I asked rhythm, rhythm at every scene, and whenever the actors started to slow it down, I did not let them do so. They know the scenes very well and there is now a threat to sit in the scenes, to not want to go out of the stage, to stay there because it is so good. But the actors must realize what scene is following theirs and they must prepare this scene. Otherwise, it will be a selfish gesture to just play my scene and not acknowledge what is coming. This is valid especially for Scenes 3, 4, 7 and 8 where the actors are alone on the stage; they play with the audience and might forget that they need to finish the scene in time so that the next one will have enough energy to start.

The only scene so far that has not yet gained a stable timeline is Scene 11. This scene was today 13 minutes long, which is extremely long. It must be ten minutes; otherwise, Scene 12 cannot start properly. The actors must understand this. So, yes, I am measuring time with each scene and acting like a metronome that does not let the pace of the scene slow down. The changes between the scenes happen in the dark,

and excepting three changes, they must all be no longer than 10 seconds. The actors first did not make this timeline, but now it is more than OK. This also has music to it, a rhythm. Every scene connects to the other with darkness and special sounds for each scene, related to the performance, each are an attempt to represent the time passing. This is what the author suggests as well.

After Scene 1 there is the ticking of the clock; after Scene 2 we hear a loud alarm sound; after Scene 3 there are ten seconds of loud steps on a sidewalk; Scene 4 is followed by the sound of water drops; Scene 6 has a longer change, 12 seconds, we hear a train loudly crashing into a building; Scene 7 is prepared by cartoon like country music; after Scene 7 there are loud gunshots heard in the air; Scene 8 ends with the sound ducks make on a lakeside; for Scene 9 the time of set change is almost 15 seconds, I hope it will get shorter, Scene 9 ends with the sound of television having no live emission; Scenes 10a and 10b are connected so there is darkness and sound only at the end of Scene 10b, a robotic voice is repeating: Întuneric (meaning darkness in Romanian) and this lasts for 15 seconds, after this The Barefoot Lady shouts Lumină (meaning light) and the light comes in, the scene begins. Scene 11 is followed by a ballerina-box sound, a tune preparing Scene 12. After Scene 12 there is only live music, the explosion of sound and emotion.

In the afternoon we worked on two separate scenes, the sixth and then late-late at night the twelfth scene. Between the two we worked three hours on the music. The guys invited a professional drummer who gave very good ideas on how the drums should sound like. This is when I decided that The Dog, Dana, will not play the huge drum anymore. I gave a small toy guitar and now she can roam the whole space (stage and auditorium) filling it with her enormous energy that she gains after stepping out of her dog costume. We see her in white (sleeveless T-shirt and panties) with a black toy guitar becoming a free spirit, a strong woman.

Scene 12 we worked on until dawn just not being able to stop. It was crazy. It went so well. I redrew the structure of the scene, and asked Maria to be aggressive, elementary, and not nice and childish. This is the key she must find. Her emotions have the power on her, and not the words, not the text. I must feel this machine/person even if she speaks Japanese. Maria let herself go and the scene just became a miracle. It is crazy that a piece of metal becomes alive and all that I can look at is the drawing of The Dog misspelled: Atomatu de Bături (it would sound like: Vening Mchine). This night again I went to sleep at 6 A.M. and I am not too happy about it, but I am in a state of creation when I cannot sleep anymore. And it feels good, I love it.

Thursday, December 16

This morning's rehearsal was correct, I asked everyone to concentrate this time on the partner, to hear each other, to be able to forget the text and answer the words for the first time. I also did not let the rhythm down; the pace of the scenes is getting quicker and quicker. In the evening everybody was in the final costumes (we rehearse in costumes from Monday now, and the actors are more than comfortable now in their clothes. Some of the actors even wear their costumes during lunchtime).

The photographer came and hopefully we will have lots of good pictures. It was funny that in Scene 11 he forgot to take pictures, he just watched the scene. Tonight, we started at 7 P.M., and the auditorium was pretty full of people who worked on this performance (starting from the two doormen to the cleaning lady). I like this feeling that surrounds the performance.

The technique was also working as supposed to at this rehearsal. We have a TV set entering the stage in Scene 9 (The Dog brings it in) and we see the news in it, after that The Dog switches to live transmission and starting from

Scene 9 we have the performance (details of it) seen in the TV. This switch from the recorded news to live transmission must be perfectly on time with The Dog's gestures. This finally happened yesterday, and I am not worried anymore, now I know it works ok. The live transmission will again switch to a negative picture at the end; even the live transmission goes crazy with the music. The actors use the TV set as a way of communication (The Old Lady talks to it and hits it because it does not respond, The Man To Whom Birth is watching The Barefoot Lady through the television, The Vending Machine touches the screen feeling the face of The Man Who Lives on the Sidewalk etc.), the performance uses the TV set as a modality of alienation.

Friday, December 17

I asked today's rehearsal to be a relaxed one, more focused on the structure, more technical, but very rhythmic. Today another photographer came, which was not the best idea as the actors were not in costumes and the intensity was low. But he was sent to come. I asked Marin again not to use his voice so he would hopefully have one at the pre-opening tonight. It was funny because he started to mime things; we all laughed and let out the tension we all had today.

In the evening the audience came, and for the first time The Dog and The State Functionary could start their role before the performance on the stage begins. Both are among the audience as the spectators arrive, The State Functionary is talking to them, „aggressing" them as a politician would approach his/her possible electoral audience. The Dog does not speak but touches everyone, smiles at them, plays with them; this depends on the willingness of each audience member. She is not aggressive, but she keeps smiling, she does positive aggression. Most of the people loved to play with her and laughter was heard among the audience, starting the whole performance in a relaxed tone.

Tonight, the performance reached 110 minutes and I am sure tomorrow we can go even lower with the time. The audience reacted very well to the approaches in every scene, and Scene 3 was just fantastic. Tonight, The Man Who Lives on the Sidewalk did not sit out in the cold, so we are sure tomorrow he can. I am waiting for tomorrow so much; it will be a great night. I hope so.

Saturday, December 18

Today we met at noon to work on the ending. The ending of the performance looks like chaos, but it is very well structured, every movement is in place. Last night the actors stepped out a little bit from this precisely structured chaos, so we did it today 5 times. The movements work like music while we also hear music. I worked on the lights too, the ending will have strong light changes, and we go crazy even with the lights. We could go even crazier, so we agreed to use a stroboscope starting January. We need to bring it to the theater, and today we do not have time for this.

We all ate together after the rehearsal; it was good to just be together. We tried not to talk about the performance but of course that was all we did. We all noticed that for weeks now we are speaking the lines of the play whenever we can, most of the time involuntarily.

The opening night went very well, it was 3 minutes shorter. The audience applauded back the actors five or six times, and at one moment the boys suddenly decided to redo the music again, and we all went crazy.

Luca's presence in the end was so strong. He comes in with Mr. Ştefănescu and he is drawing on the stage or wherever he feels like. We realize that it is him who draws the charcoal Sun, he is the future. There must be a future even if the world has come to an end. I am grateful Cosmina and Mircea let their kid be part of the performance, it was a sudden idea I had, and they immediately said yes.

It was a great night followed by an empty morning when I had to leave suddenly after more than a month. I can hardly wait to come back in February and see the performance, my colleagues again.

The opening night brought many people from different cities. The author came as well, it was an honor having him see the performance, and people very important to me came from Târgu-Mures, from Cluj, critics came from Bucharest and lots of other people who came to see the actors, meet the author. There was a cheering mood before the performance and a mixed atmosphere after it. I was watching it like an outsider, I try to do this for two years now, just let it go as the opening night starts, and I believe it hit hard, at least this is what I felt sitting among the public.

Usually, I go to each performance, if possible, but Târgoviște is very far, so I won't be able to come until February. I have a few hours to let it all go. I don't know yet how to deal with this. Meeting dear people who came such a long way for the premiere helped a lot. I tried to celebrate with the actors, to enjoy this last night.

This was the Chronicle of a Sunrise.

Epilogue – 2023, thirteen years after writing the diary

It struck me how little has changed in theater since I wrote this diary.

I still believe in its power to have an impact on the way we think, not a quantitative, measurable effect, but a qualitative one, a fine tune that infiltrates in you and makes visible the invisible in our lives. I should have become skeptical, sarcastic or cynical, at least this is what I experience nowadays, this atmosphere. I wanted to give up theater once and for all, probably this break-up led me back to it and kept my faith in it, faith in theater, in what we do.

Chapter 4

Identity Awareness in the Postmodern Age

In this final section, I ask the question: for ***whom*** we make theater and who are we who make theater, considering our consumption of digital information and media. We should be aware of the perceptual tendencies and consumer behaviors of our public, as well as how we as creators can effectively engage the social transformations induced by the digital world in which we all find ourselves.

The 21st century Western world is struggling between the image presented in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, a world society structured around efficiency and science, and the past that it wishes to leave behind in its search for identity. The word "identity" is used in many senses. The Oxford English Dictionary gives the following definition:

> *"The sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality.*
> *Personal identity (in Psychology), the condition or fact of remaining the same person throughout the various phases of existence; continuity of the personality."* (Oxford 2010)

An identity can be best defined in comparison to something else or by some relation through time. It is easier to notice and draw a picture of something if we can compare it to its former state, its former characteristics. Change and continuity are more easily perceived this way. One can observe that x has retained certain characteristics across time

and environmental contexts and so can be identified through a stable structure of predicates that indicate self-sameness. Or one can determine that x has become more like y or less like z and is therefore different than it was before – leading to increased ambiguity about what attributes of x constitute its identity. An actor's work of forming a character from the text to a flesh and blood person on stage proceeds through such phases of differentiation (and ambiguation).

But it is not only the actors' (or other artists') search for identity that brings with it a process of continuous change. The search for identity is rather general. When referring to identity, I tend to look at the act of redefining ourselves during and after finishing (or witnessing) a process of theatrical creation. In this sense every participant within the theatrical process goes through similar changes of identity: spectator, actor, stage director, dramaturg, designer, composer, etc. Creating and witnessing a creation inevitably requires the questioning of who we are in order to relate to the creative process. And the nuances of the question can be very different depending on our circumstances. The search for identity in the theatrical process involves multiple aspects of identity when, for instance, we seek to differentiate a character or signature style, assume various roles in the collaborative process, or embrace personal de-individuation to assume several identities as artists. The more general question of *who I am* – before, while and after creating or witnessing the creation – is both a necessity and an inevitability in our work.

The postmodern artist may ask another question related to identity, though elevated to the level of society: in a global culture that tends towards uniformity, how can our own cultures and traditions survive? Instead of living in the past and denying the constant change and development that belongs to our epoch, is there a valid contemporary culture we can relate to, participate in, or even create that can ground us in some shared reality? Social thinker Zygmund Bauman coins the concept of *liquid modernity* (Bauman 2000), when

talking about our age, where identities (and relationships and economics) are in perpetual change and mobility within our contemporary societies. In this new condition of constant mobility, the established and socially embedded paths are no longer necessarily determinative.

Our present tends toward globalization, in which the English language is our *lingua franca* and the expansion of multinational corporations drives us toward a uniform future. In the face of such pressures, new movements emerge to protect local traditions and preserve national identity. These opposing tendencies toward provincial conservatism and global integration are now played out on the world wide web, revealing the contradictions of globalized culture while simultaneously demonstrating the power of digital communication to drive both cultural differentiation and homogenization.

4.1. The Appearance of Virtual Identities

Romania and other Eastern post-communist countries were first reached by the Internet's instant messaging softwares at the end of the 90s, by softwares like Mirc, later Yahoo Messenger, then MSN Messenger, etc. Lacking regulation and identity-authentication protocols, users could present themselves in whatever they wanted, give false information, or redefine their own identities as many times as they wanted. Naturally this anonymous virtual setting brought new, previously unknown situations, and through this game-like reality the gates of identity-invention opened up. That fever of spending hours every day playing this game of identity in internet coffee houses, garages, or smelly storage rooms where modems were installed in ad-hoc fashion led to exciting prospects: meeting faceless strangers, exploring new ways of roleplaying, and engaging in an unprecedented form of freedom and imagination for young people

in the early 90s. Since there was no imagery – only the words written by each participant – this rudimentary way of roleplaying required creativity, fantasy, and projection. The possibilities of pretense and deception provoked interesting questions like, "Who am I? Who is the other? Is this exchange authentic or all in my head? This can't be real. But it feels real!" Theater-makers might have noticed that this novel method of communication replicated mechanisms that could rightly be considered dramatic or theatrical: from nothing but text and dialogue, we imagine figures, personages, motivations, intentions, voices, bodies, stories. Behind purely verbal expressions, we perceive gesture, action, subtext. The interpretation of mere text leads to a virtual reality full of possible performances.

Exercise: Grant two minutes for an improvisation on a certain theme. Then, reduce the time to a minute, then to half a minute and finally to twenty seconds. The expressions in this theme will become denser and more concentrated this way and finally it will become clear, what is the least that is enough to express the chosen theme. The opposite of this exercise is the expansion of the timeframe. Try to expand the two minutes to four and pay attention to what new details were needed to fill this larger time frame. This allows you to observe how one can save energy being aware of the long-term task in a scene.
These exercises are recommended to be performed on a regular basis (once a week). When the exercise is working well the amount of time granted can be reduced, and if we want to give more complex tasks within the improvisational task the time granted can be expanded. However, the reduction of time has a stronger, more visible effect for those performing the exercise.

In a few years technology had evolved so rapidly that imagery (pictures, videos, livestreaming, etc.) became a part of the game, necessitating less and less composition and creativity. The theatrical aspect faded, giving way to more filmic approaches to communication. Descriptions of how one looks were quickly replaced by photo or video, and video conference made chatrooms and other text-based fora seem archaic.

The Argentinian theoretician Ernesto Laclau proposed that the experience of dislocation in subjectivity – the formation of social identity via an external field of objective conditions and possibilities, to which we must relate through simultaneous self-differentiation and identifications – has positive effects, too. Dislocation, then, names not only the subject's structural exclusion or otherness from the social field in its pursuit of identity, but also an opening or gap within social structure that makes possible the subject's freedom to decide what identifications it will make to constitute its own singular identity. Hall points out a similar conclusion to this observation: it is true that dislocation confuses the stable identities of the past, but at the same time opens the way to new connections, birthing new identities and subjects. (Hall 1997) The internet, a truly marvelous invention of our time, in the first few years of its appearance, was optimistically referred to as "the world of total freedom." On the other hand, the internet can also be viewed as an institutional structure with the unthinkable power to suck in all users, only to monitor them continuously afterwards. Users have their personal data stored, collected, and sold. By using certain email provider services, we see targeted advertising on our email interface based on the contents of our personal correspondence. For the Eastern-Central European public of the world wide web, the game I've been describing has features one might associate with certain properties of communism. The creation of new virtual identities, despite its upside, could be regarded with some suspicion. The capacity

to exploit the secrecy, anonymity, deception, and the power-play of information inherent to digital communication could be viewed as eerily resonant with other, darker games of spy-craft and clandestine surveillance.

Romania's communist regime came to an end in 1989. During several decades, through its secret service web, this regime gave many of its volunteers and forced collaborators alternative identities. Potential informers were given new names or allowed to choose names for themselves, obtaining classified identities through which they could covertly report to the state on the whereabouts and doings of individuals suspected of subversive activity. Those being secretly observed were also given classified names in state files without knowing about it. There were situations in which state collaborators and secret agents were themselves kept under surveillance.

In today's gaming and virtual role-playing, these layers of secrecy sound intriguing and feverishly playful, but their reality was a brutal one. The enforcement of these double identities produced a culture of constant duplicity and treachery that robbed many individuals of their own real identity, often leading to mass psychological dissonance, chronic mistrust, interpersonal conflict, and even suicide. This may be a rather shocking and extreme parallel to draw since Romanian communism systematically intimidated its populace by stoking doubt and fear, while the goal of the internet was to provide fast and free communication everywhere on the globe. Yet even if the internet offered individuals freedom and choice in the construction of their digital selves, internet users today are aware that their personal data and virtual identities are in the records somewhere. The surveillance we acknowledge and accept on digital platforms as commonplace terms and conditions perhaps indicates that the early caution exercised by Eastern Europeans toward this technology was more justified and less paranoid than originally assumed. Engendered by political skepticism, internet users

have begun to adopt an attitude less and less connected with the concept of freedom promoted by the digital optimists decades ago.

4.2. Media Identity How is this Working in Theater?

Motto: Is there life after Facebook?
(Facebook user)

4.2.1. Media Transforming Theater

Digitalization is taking over more and more areas of our personal lives. If we only look at the logics science fiction writers were dreaming about thirty years ago, and that most of their "crazy ideas" came to be reality today[47] (the force of weapons, virtual time traveling, computer games, invisible shields, and weapons based on magnetic fields), then one could expect that the imaginary futures in today's science fiction could manifest in our own near future (real time traveling, human cloning, remote brain control, resurrection, etc.). Computers have brought revolutionary changes to our world, significantly modifying the everyday life of individuals, their habits, and their use of communication. Professor Lehmann, whose theories I discussed earlier, sees these changes reflected in what he calls postdramatic theater. In contemporary theater, dramatic narration has been taken over by "post-epic" strategies and multimedia environments that transmit stories in fragmented pieces of information and sensory stimulation. According to Lehmann, drama can no longer be considered theater's most fundamental and

[47] Think about the feature film *Fantastic Voyage* from 1966 (Cinemascope Pictures, directed by Richard Fleischer) where most of the action took place inside a human body. Today's medicinal science is well accustomed to using microscopic cameras to examine inner parts of the human body, not to mention the revolutionary inventions in medicinal nanorobotics.

essential form of existence. Drama, rather, is but one of many formal structures that theater, as a medium of live performance, might make use of. Since the 60s, theater has entered a stage of concentrated self-reflexivity as practitioners have explored theater as a total system of signification whose elements can be deconstructed and related in new ways, giving rise to formal experiments with light, sound, space, objects, projection, speech, embodiment, and reality effects. In drama, all these theatrical elements or sign systems are unified to produce an illusory world of representation and storytelling onstage. Postdramatic theater, doing away with dramatic unity and wholeness, explores the heterogeneous processes and mechanisms that underlie theater as a medium of experience and communication. (Lehmann 2009, 29-42)

4.2.2. What Kind of Environment Does the Audience Come from in Today's Theater?

To give a picture of how much time the virtual world occupies in the life of any individual, I have made a short diary of a day noting all the occasions I encountered the digital world. I would guess that any young adult would have a similar diet of digital "consumption."

> Wednesday, November 11th, 2009
> *In the morning I see the news on TV. In my car the radio is on while I'm driving. I switch among at least three channels in a couple of minutes. I stop at the red light and have a huge LCD screen in front of me on a building that is constantly displaying commercials. Ninety seconds at a red light means at least a dozen commercials to be seen at once. Getting home, I spend two hours in front of my computer, and during the day I will sit down in front of it for at least another five or six times. The desktop computer and the laptop both have at least*

> *five different web-browser windows open simultaneously, so that by the end of the day this number climbs up to around thirty. Every time my cell phone rings, I look at its display. Besides more than twenty incoming and outgoing calls, I also read my text messages and send eight to ten of those myself. Later in the day, I play a game on my phone while waiting to meet someone. I listen to music on my iPod, choosing from among hundreds of artists and genres. Being a regular photographer, I routinely look at the display of my digital camera as I take at least fifty pictures a day, and later in the evening I organize the pictures I've shot. At the end of the day, I find myself again in front of the TV for a film that lasts around two hours.*

This Wednesday is just an average weekday. The number of digital devices varies from day to day, but the big picture remains the same. Most of the individuals entering a theater production today come from a similar media background; they all spend the same amount of time with their digital devices and in digitally saturated media environments. The creators of theater need to be aware of this fact. They need to know to whom they are presenting their art and the shared tendencies of their "clients." Likewise, we shouldn't neglect to note that we, today's generation of theater-makers, also come from this digital environment, many of us more intimately acquainted with the world of the internet than the real world. After all, most of our relationships are maintained on virtual platforms (email, instant messaging, video-chat, social networks, online gaming, etc.)[48]. It is therefore impossible to avoid the question: how

[48] According to David Reid, BBC reporter in February 2006 the *World of Warcraft* online game alone had more than 6 million subscribers. Article here: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/click_online/5202212.stm (viewed on November 19th, 2009)

do the structures of contemporary theater relate to these technological changes between generations of theater viewers and creators?

Exercise: This exercise takes several weeks. It is also recommended for dramaturgs, playwrights, and other theater disciplines. Let's stick to Hamlet's "*To be or not be...*" monologue. The students must rewrite this monologue to the vernacular they use while messaging, chatting, emailing, etc. The text must be approached very freely. When the new version of the monologue is born, we work on this new text. Let us hear how it sounds and how the underlying message is transmitted through this new language. Please note that within this exercise the literary or poetic value of the text is less important than the qualities inherent to the natural language developed in the translation. When we succeed in this exercise, we should go back again to the original Shakespearian text and make it sound just as natural as the translation.

4.2.3. Industry and Technology Enter the Theater

In all times, theater has adapted to the social factors surrounding it. At the end of the 19th century, when electricity was introduced to most urban households and theater buildings, stage images were completely transformed. With electricity, multiple light sources and spotlights were made possible, along with innovative machinery like revolving stages, automated scenery changes, etc. It was the dawn of a new era in theater, when technical possibilities permitted the creators' fantasy to build new effects, images, and

scenery. Lehmann considers that the appearance of electric stage-lighting started to build a frame around the stage. This frame was already present within the forced perspective of the Italian stage but would be augmented by light's capacity to frame the actor and focus the audience's attention to particular aspects of the stage image more precisely.

Another equally important revolution took place because of the birth of television. While the film industry generated competition between itself and the theater for audiences, TV also affected the individual's perception of image and picture by significantly altering the everyday life of the TV-owner. As soon as television sets were a common household appliance, providing constant access to news and moving pictures, the institution of theater was also compelled to replicate these viewing habits on the stage. Projections of film began to appear in theatrical performances[49] and the language of television began to influence dramatic texts. Storylines became more fractured and episodic, performances became shorter, and the new generation of playwrights started to write in narrative units derived from the film industry (in *schnitts*, or "cuts").

The digital world has only been present in our day to day lives in the Eastern-European region for the last couple decades. Personal computers appeared some twenty-five years ago, while the internet became available 24/7 on mobile devices during the last fifteen years[50]. Ever since, the human perception of images has been forever changed. Theater's fast reaction to this new environment and its swift integration of new digital possibilities are quite natural, inevitable adaptations. Computer generated digital effects and projections, live filming, and mixed footage appear in

[49] Piscator, Brecht and Meyerhold were the first theater directors to introduce video footage on the stage.

[50] In Western Europe and the United States this process started several years earlier, but this time difference is not too significant. We cannot speak about underdevelopment in this case since everyone can use the same functions of the internet once they are able to access it.

theater productions quite regularly now, though their content, structure, and effects on the audience are quite different than in movies[51]. The digital world's effect on the theater can be measured not only by the theater's usage of its tools, but also in contemporary theater's very conception of image aesthetics. What is the angle the audience sees the production from? Where is the audience situated in relation to the players? How do the locations change? How is time structured within the play? How many things are happening simultaneously on the set? Where is the limit of today's viewer's imaginative perception? These considerations are all affected by the emergence of the digital era.

4.2.4. The Rise of Image in Theater

Is theater only passively adapting to the evolution of technology or is it in fact actively responding by incorporating or refusing the new languages of expression introduced by technology in our daily lives? A very banal example is the telephone. Once people started to use it, it appeared on stage as an object used for conversation; later, the conversation of two remote voices became part of the theatrical language without requiring the telephone's presence as a stage object.

Is the appearance of new media leading theater and old media towards self-reflection? This last question is addressed by Hans-Thies Lehmann in relation to postdramatic theater. Lehmann considers it important to point out a difference: the intensification of images by digital media structures our perception of reality but does not represent it. It creates a frame that makes visible the way in which reality is mediated through sensations and signs. But the main character of theater is that it cannot be entirely enclosed within a frame because the stage is the continuation

[51] The films were rather illustrative, while the digital effects are rather integrated within the performance, even having the whole production built around it.

of the audience in contemporary theater. There is a strong discrepancy between the strength and high definition of the images presented today and the weakness or "low definition" of human spirit that is present in society. This inconsistency can be noticed not only within theater, but it is also present in our quotidian lives, in the every-day actions and gestures of common people who are sucked into images on monitors and thus live a significant portion of their lives virtually, in a quasi-real and disembodied space oversaturated with images and artificial stimulants.

4.2.5. The Performative Experience of the Audience

To be able to address the performative experience of audiences we first must look at the personal performative experiences of theater audiences in the virtual world. In central and Eastern Europe this segment would be up to 35 years old, while in the U.S. it would cover generations up to 40-50 years old. Digital technology is evolving and coming up with something new as I am writing these lines: a new software, a new application, or a new virus is already on its way. It is a bit impossible to write about the "present" or the "now" under these quickly changing circumstances. At the same time, the modes through which the digital world affects our lives don't change as quickly. In her article *Friend Me If You Facebook*, E. J. Westlake (2008) presents and analyzes the applications, structures, and performative possibilities given to users by Facebook[52]. Today, theater spectators arrive in theatrical space and time from an environment filled with media, rising from their seat in front of the computer to sit down again in the front row of a theater. This is precisely why we are trying to understand how this situation changes the structures and social role of theater creation today. What kind of performance and role-playing is present in this

[52] www.facebook.com, since the article was written Facebook is powered by Meta.

Generation Y and Z reality[53], and how does the theater-creator of the same generation relate to these performative aspects of everyday virtual life?

Simultaneous Image-Perception

In the opening statement of his book, Lehmann draws attention to the fact that linear reading strategies necessitated by printed books have been taken over by new reading strategies that utilize "simultaneous perception from multiple perspectives." (Lehmann 2009, 5) This new habit of perception and reception is broader, yet much shallower, than classical reading methods, which can be characterized as concentrated and labor intensive. "Indeed, the web allows – even demands – reading strategies that are not linear, inviting the reader to choose the path and order of text read, as driven by the reader's own desire and cognitive processing style." (Westlake 2008, 25) Westlake distinguishes between two kinds of text: the readerly text and the writerly text[54]. While the readerly text is complete, insusceptible to editing, and therefore the product of a past process, the writerly text exists in the state of "a perpetual present, upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduced the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages." (Westlake 2008, 26) Open-ended changeability and the bottomless options are characteristics of active

[53] Generation Y is used by Westlake to describe the generation grown up in the age of the internet. The term itself has been coined by marketing consultants to the media-oriented Generation X. Westlake's term can also be interpreted as "Generation Why?"

[54] Westlake borrows the two terms from Roland Barthes and applies them to the world of internet. When Barthes came up with this terminology in the 70s in *S/Z*, the internet wasn't even invented.

participant reading, an approach through which the reader can intervene in the text read or image viewed. The web gives everyone the opportunity to do more than just switch between websites like TV channels. Users can participate in the process of an ongoing multimedial story that enlists our perpetual communication, expression of opinions, search for connections, and even different levels of exhibitionism: it is all about putting ourselves in the center of it. Mirroring the appeal of increased agency in digital environments, theatrical productions now regularly curate the interventions and involvement of the public, offering spectators the possibility to vote, comment, choose the outcome or ending of a situation, select a character or dramatic action that one wishes to follow, decide on the succession of scenes, roleplay, etc. This is a clear example of how theater has incorporated and implemented the communication structures of internet usage into its aesthetics of engagement.

Exercise: I advise implementing this exercise at least once yearly or possibly several times. It is very helpful not only for acting students and for actors, but for anyone studying a character or play. We should start the exercise only when we feel that we are deeply familiar with the character or play being studied.

a. Start to talk about the character/play. The starting point should be fixed collectively or by personal choice. If working in a group, designate a storyteller who will narrate the plot of a play or a character arc. The storytelling is guided by one of the listeners (either an instructor or colleague) with only two sentences: "*Expand!*" and "*Continue!*" When the storyteller hears the first command, he/she must elaborate on the part or detail told in the moment of the command,

and only on that part or detail. The storyteller can return to the story about the character/play when the "*Continue!*" command is given. It is important to resume the story from where it was stopped, which is also the hardest task of the exercise!

b. It is helpful to talk about each other's characters as well. If someone is talking about Hamlet, then it is helpful for the student/actor interpreting Hamlet to later assume the role of the leader as well. This way, the actor can discover what others (or other characters) think about our character.

This exercise is useful while talking about a performance, when the director and scenographer meet, or whenever we feel the need to expand our imaginations about the interpretation of characters and the details of their relationships.

The current wave of participatory and immersive aesthetics in the theater is largely the result of rethinking the frame of the theater, through decades of deconstruction, reconstitution, and expansion. Back in 1968, Peter Brook had already written that theater cannot be enclosed in a frame because the stage is the continuation of the audience's space. (Brook 1999, 179) Lehmann noted the same thing when speaking about postdramatic theater, reiterating Brook's observation that a theatrical event cannot be enclosed in a frame in the way we would "frame" a painting or a photograph. (Lehmann 2009, 130-131) Framing not only orients our attention by creating points of focus, but it does so by selecting and excluding information. Take, for example, televised news broadcasts. Whatever falls outside that square

of attention is invisible for the viewer, impossible to know, and thus non-existent for the viewer.

The frame's effects of omission and exclusion are detectable when we consider reports on war zones. In most cases, news coverage rarely shows us blood or other spectacles of violence. We usually receive the technical data of the events, such as the number of casualties and wounded, but blood is not part of the picture in the frame. This kind of framing is strongly used by the US media to present the events in the Near East and Iraq. Chris Hedges, a New York Times and Pulitzer group-coverage winner reporter specialized in reports on the Near East and Iraq writes about this in his documentary book entitled *Collateral Damage: America's War Against Iraqi Civilians* (Hedges and Al-Arian, 2008). Mass media has accustomed its viewers to such framing techniques, whether in commercials or their coverage of the most delicate political issues. The naturalization of these framing techniques depends on their self-erasure, achieved primarily through routine exposure and habituated consumption. Framing is not usually a transparent convention that alerts the viewer of its operations but is "hidden" to preserve the promise of objective reporting. This is not to criticize the media, but to simply acknowledge that framing is a feature and not a bug of all media everywhere. It is important to make these observations to see the media environment today's theatergoer is coming from. The average media consumer is becoming more cognizant of these framing techniques, which has generated a heightened awareness of the presence of biases, spin, propaganda, product placement, and the use of outrage and entertainment in the current economy of information. The postdramatic stage is a site where media literacy has been exercised and interrogated for decades, with self-reflexivity and medium transparency being key features of its aesthetics.

At this point it is beyond any dispute that the worlds of virtual reality and the theater share many characteristics

in common: different levels of involvement available to the spectator/user, possibilities for role-playing, interpretative tasks, sensorial immersion, participation, the conflation of fact and fiction, the etc. The question remains how and where we can identify these points of contiguity and how these can be used for the benefit of contemporary theater.

Generations Y and Z

Generation Y as well as Gen Z has a unique relation to reading/viewing texts and images since they have mostly grown up in this environment. They did not have to adapt to web culture and switch communication structures. The older generation, who witnessed the appearance of the first computers and the rapid spread of the web, needed to learn all the skills required to use these new technologies to their full potential – especially as they migrated into the workplace. They had to get used to finding their way around the virtual world of the web as if learning to walk again – though this time in a jungle of ever-fluctuating texts, images, and information.

Westlake states that the cyber-children of Generation Y (and we should add Gen Z, as well) are not capable of the kind of social interactions considered normal and natural by those generations who haven't grown up online. The web has not replaced face-to-face interaction or the use of communication media like phones, but only activities like watching TV or sleeping[55]. Direct communication hasn't decreased but, on the contrary, digital communication augments our previous channels of social interaction. Westlake holds that we can communicate at a much higher level with more

[55] The two examples described by Westlake are based on the research of two sociologists, Thomas W. Brignall and Thomas Van Valey. (*The Impact of Internet Communication on Social Interaction*). Westlake also refers to a project research led by Jeffrey Boase and his colleagues called *Pew Internet and American Life Project* (*The Strength of Internet Ties* 2006).

sophisticated and immersive channels than before, since these different ways of communication are complementary and non-exclusive. The person with a lot of emails to send likely has many face-to-face relations as well. It "comes down to preferred modes of communication for people of different generations. The generations of people older than current college students [...] do not have the same perspective on the internet as a means for social networking as the generation that is just beginning to graduate from college. [...] For Generation Y-ers, writing or texting is an act [...] creating a collaborative, interactive and performative text." (Westlake 2008, 27)

The Presence of Interpretation in Our Day to Day Lives

Before the virtual revolution, interpretation was needed to decode most images and texts. This is what Lehmann calls a "thorough and concentrated receptive ability" (Lehmann 2007). In computer networks and on the web, this kind of interpretation is no longer needed since all data is already decoded; all schematics of functionality are given. One just has to learn how to use the programs and applications and to link information, but the real decoding work is not needed anymore.

This characteristic of the web has a strong influence on those young theater goers who have few occasions to encounter situations and information structures where serious interpretation work is needed. (Like the arts of theater, poetry, and visual arts for example.) Metaphor and symbolic representation have almost become useless in their traditional literary meaning. The word "symbol" has been recycled by web users already and has been assigned a new meaning in this context[56]. In the world of computers, a symbol can be any single letter and any other single character.

[56] It is also interesting to look at the word icon and its altered meaning. Lehmann notes regarding this matter, that the image (on televisions,

Different applications have popularized different symbols: for instance, a round yellow face showing a tongue for example[57]. This symbol does not symbolize anything other than a small yellow face with a tongue or at best the momentary state of mind of the individual typing it, meaning that that is what he/she would do if he/she was present in person. Yahoo named these symbols emoticons[58]. The main rule-structures of using this kind of symbolic communication are already pre-assembled conventions.

While communication in the virtual world can only be conducted via the social formulas developed by programmers and website creators, in the theater it is possible to come up with new schematics for communication and symbolic representation in every performance. At first, we might be under the impression that the possible formulas and structures have an endless number in the virtual world and are more limited in the theater. But the essence of living art is what gives this wonderful privilege of creating new structures and to refresh the metaphorical substrate of symbolic thought. Theater not only can assimilate the perceptual and communicative structures of the internet (that is, to accommodate realities outside the stage) but can respond in real time to the digital world by diagnosing its deficiencies and elaborating on its successes.

Virtual Performative Acts

To highlight the digital habits of virtual world operators (both the spectator and the creator having this background), we will take for example the Facebook platform, a virtual place where social interaction happens consistently (at least

monitors, displays) has lost its iconic character to become much less than that: a simple carrier of information.

57 Microsoft Office puts all Smiley Face characters in the section Symbols.

58 Emoticon – a specifically web-culture word, invented by melting together the words emotion and icon.

within Romanian society Facebook is the place to be present). The increased number and spectrum of digital platforms count Clubhouse, Craigslist, Glassdoor, Instagram, the Metaverse, Nextdoor, Snapchat, Tiktok, Venmo, Yelp, Youtube etc. among the virtual places which provide an array of performatives that can be carried out in increasingly complex and even embodied ways. But we will take as an example the performative acts familiar on Facebook, as this platform (at least in Romania) is used by all generations. Facebook started as a peephole into our private lives but seems to have become a medium for image-building and self pr-ing. Facebook users can perform many different actions on the platform: editing the user profile to define the data linked to his/her personality; inviting new friends to the network; confirming a friendship; suggesting new friends to existing ones; publishing references to preferred books, movies, music; joining a group; creating or deleting a group; publishing of new comments; replying to existing comments; viewing of picture albums; uploading videos; writing of private and community messages; sharing of social status (relationships, marriage, etc.); changing of profile picture; and finally a specifically Facebook invention: to poke somebody you know. This action of poking someone is a momentary action, and it has an air of physicality to it. The graphic symbol of this application is an extended index-finger, which can be used to poke someone. This poke can then be turned back from the person addressed; there is the possibility to "poke back". The administrators of the Facebook platform admit that this application has in fact no real use, "we thought it would be funny to create a function that has no specific sense or goal and just see what happens next"[59]. The users of Facebook (and of course all users of other social networking platforms too) are in an interactive relationship with each other this way. According to Westlake's own Facebook experience there are so called "Facebook whores" who are constantly

[59] www.facebook.com

befriending as many people as possible, and then there are those who don't seem to find their place in this virtual society and have but a few relationships, or they just have a profile but aren't active on the platform. After Westlake's article had been published, Facebook introduced a new feature that shows the activity regarding getting involved in the system of every user without clicking or liking or performing a Facebook action. According to a user's activity and the number of people the user is connected to the program gives a coefficient of how integrated someone is in the Facebook community and in the case of lower activity it urges other users to get in contact with those who are not as active as the majority. This little "attention" really shows how much communication has shifted from the real world towards the virtual. Not such a long time ago personal encounter[60] was the main form of interpersonal communication and relation, what we see today is that the channels of communication are structured in such a way that it becomes possible to totally neglect, if needed, the necessity of personal, face to face communication. During the COVID pandemic, virtual encounter was the only meeting option in many cases, as traveling or visiting was banned.

Virtual Performative Acts Surrounding the Self

Westlake makes quite a few references to social psychologist Ervin Goffman, who observes that during a conversation the individuals are not primarily focusing on the discussion itself, but on how they present themselves through the discussion. The active construction of the Self's manner of appearance is always at the center of our social behavior. This situation stands at the base of dramatic acting. The actors speak a text but in fact something else happens – what is beyond or beneath the text is what is played (ie, the

[60] Or until personal encounters happened, the handwritten correspondence or telephone conversations.

subtext). Goffman's dramaturgical theory of social interaction precedes the internet and social media by decades, yet he articulates one of the most characteristic behaviors of the web-user generation: the digital presentation of the self is strategically curated through the careful selection and omission of information we decide to publish. If we stick with another example from Facebook, we might note the following: on the pictures uploaded to the application, users can tag people in the images. The person who was tagged on a photograph gets a notification and if the tagged user is not satisfied with this act, it is up to him/her to leave the tagging there or remove it if they don't want to be associated with the picture.

In the past, we could manage our privacy more completely, and this has drastically changed in the present. The private life of individuals is always subject to recording. On the most common web portals one can search for people and gain access to a certain level of information about them. Web-based interactive communication is making our private life increasingly public, often in ways we don't intend or understand. All immediate reactions to everything that affects us – like sharing, liking, commenting on a post, even just viewing it – are made public on message walls. Who knows who and from where[61] also became public information, one can see the number of "friends", "common friends", tagged relationships. Everyday happenings of our personal lives are updated in pictures, videos, and status updates, and are available to virtually anyone. Video-chats show corners of our private spaces. Everyone can see whether we are connected to the web. We don't know who accesses our digital profiles, and we will probably never exactly find out how many people have investigated the information we shared about ourselves. But all this happens with our own consent, by our own decision to share our privacy:

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[61] Facebook, Instagram, Tik-Tok, Iwiw, hi5, Tagged, Twitter, Myspace, Netlog, etc., social networks on the web.

> *Call it the ExhibitioNet. It turns out that the internet has unleashed the greatest outburst of mass exhibitionism in human history. Everyone may not be entitled, as Andy Warhol once suggested, to 15 minutes of fame. But everyone is entitled to strive for 15 minutes – or 30, 90 or much more. […] Everything about these sites is a scream for attention. Look at me. Listen to me. Laugh with me – or at me.* (Samuelson 2006)

Performative Actions and Time

What is the reality that surrounds the individual, and what does the individual think about himself/herself? It is impossible according to Lehmann to use an original, individual language of expression since we are always constituted by influences in our environment. All language is ultimately interreferential. The web is based on this continuous interlinking of references. The links that are interconnected in this world are endless, and surfing for information on the web can take forever without coming across the same page twice. Generation Y and Gen Z are used to a quick change of images and ever-shifting associations, leading to a weakening of perceptual and interpretive concentration. This leads us to consider the matter of time. The patience threshold of today's audience member has significantly decreased. Today's viewer is simply not willing, maybe no longer capable, to look at an image for a sustained length of time. Today, quick changes and newer and newer associations are needed to prolong attention. Maybe this is one reason why we've come across shorter and shorter theater productions over the last decade. This decrease in show length is not only a reaction to the audience's expectations, but also by the compressed attention of theater creators. If we look at the performative act of texting, we can identify compression as an important element of everyday communication. We

have 250 characters to use for all the information we want to transmit, and we have easily learned to do it. There is a new texting language developed already. We use acronyms and shortened expressions known to most texters today. The length in time of written communication has also decreased and the shortage of words lead to simplifying communication goals and universalizing understanding. This tendency is palpable in the verbality of everyday life as well.

> **Exercise:** Write the Hamlet monologue in a text message: this means no more than 250 characters including spacing. After everyone has written it, read it aloud. We should condense as much as possible using abbreviations, text message emoticons and symbols, etc. The task is to make the others understand what your text message monologue is about. Of course, we can play like this with any other text. To be able to effectively condense the ideas of a monologue demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the text or reveals gaps in our understanding.

The role of image and picture has significantly changed in the media. The long stare at a piece of art in the museums has been replaced by a multitude of rapid information. While the process of looking at a single image for a longer period made it possible to really discover different layers of meaning in that image, the viewing of quickly changing subsequent images gives the illusion of having a vantage point of possessing information on a larger scale. For example, in couple of news flashes in just 2-3 minutes we can learn the main events of the globe and we get a general image – an image rendered by the media that is transmitting it – of the

state of the world today[62]. If the structures used in theater cannot react in some way to the media environment which the audience is coming from, if the theater does not take in consideration the different culture of image-perception that is present within the viewers who are coming from the members of Generation Y and Gen Z, a culture of image-perception that is strongly different from the ones before, then a fracture between theater and its younger viewers is imminent. Given this perceptual shift, we have a chance to rethink (again) theater making, to reflect why we make theater, for whom and why.

Virtuality and Theater

As an imaginative exercise, let's construct a theatrical analogue to the situation of internet access. Imagine that the performance is the web, the network through which individual audience members are connected and communicate with one another. Consider this "theater access." Theater is living art, while the world of computers is a virtual reality – even if its users have a sense of reality in it, they all know it is virtual – and theater has the surplus and advantage that the different seats of all those connected to it are in the same room, and so a performance's effect on the audience also contains a collective element.

> *Langer's use of the word virtual, unlike its contemporary use in such fields as virtual reality, does not describe illusion or even representation but rather the experience of a something-more that arises from a situation. The spine-tingling experience of a powerful dance performance (or an amazing*

[62] This is not to say of course that it is not possible to immerse in a single image provided by the media. It is the circumstances of perception of images that make it harder to do so, since the perception of images itself has suffered a shift of importance.

> *painting, sculpture, song, film scene, and so on) is certainly not an illusion, even though the experience is not tangibly present or measurable. It is nonetheless fully real as a virtual event, as an amplification of the actual. […] Virtual communication, for Langer, is therefore more viscerally real than everyday communication – so real, in fact, that the only way to "get it" is to immerse yourself fully and experience it directly and firsthand. This is because art operates at a deeper level than can be conveyed at the typical level of speech, operating at a level prior to that of shared symbols and representation.* (Hoelsher 2018)

People like to watch pictures because this relaxes them or puts them in the place where social life is unfolding; this phenomenon due to the possibilities of the internet has become a global situation today. We often hear of situations where people who spend too much time in the world of the internet become addicted to the images of this virtual reality. An extreme example is the death of two gamers who died in front of their computers while playing the online version of World of Warcraft or the 28 years old gamer who played a 50 hours marathon game of Starcraft and died of exhaustion according to medics, with psychologist professor Mark Griffiths, author of several studies on online gaming addiction: "It does seem to be the case that online gaming addiction for a small minority is a real phenomenon and people suffer the same symptoms as traditional addictions."[63]

[63] Death of a man in South Korea: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4137782.stm
Death of two men: http://news.softpedia.com/news/Two-Fanatic-World-of-Warctaft-Gamers-Have-Died-Becouse-Of-WoW1821.shtml

Exercise: In the actors' changing rooms or in any space with strong enough lighting the performers of the exercise sit in front of a mirror in groups of two. In each group one person is doing the makeup of the other. They try to get nuances that make them look older, grimmer, younger, cooler, etc. Once they are done, they switch places. It is useful to allow plenty of time for this, since most of the students aren't taught these techniques, time is needed to experiment with these expressions created through makeup, and it also can be helpful to study some literature in the domain in advance.

After performing this exercise in groups of two, make sure that everyone tries it on their own too. This will provide more private time to study these expressions, mimics, and facial gestures for every member of the larger group.

This exercise can also be helpful when bringing together a new group; it can be a useful team-building technique.

Another exercise connected to this one is when the participants paint their faces in white (rice-powder, or skin friendly white paint, makeup) and experiment creating expressions on these painted faces. It might prove useful to look at the face painting techniques used in Japanese Kabuki theater.

Facebook[64]-Mania

The European way of thinking derives from the Christianization of Aristotelian philosophy. This is particularly the case in relation to the logical sequencing of time: all things have a beginning (genesis), a middle (the history of humanity), and an end (apocalypse). Professor Lehmann points out that the new structures and forms of theater did not emerge from the eccentric whims of a few crazy stage-directors but are responses to fundamental cultural changes. (Lehmann 2007) The appearance of mainstream film and television did not bring any major changes to this triadic understanding of time[65]. In general, dramatic films and shows have a well-defined time frame with a beginning, middle, and end. Most of the airings are structurally the same: they are built from linear stories, and even the different channels have symmetrical programs throughout the day: morning shows, primetime shows, weekdays programming, and weekend specials and so on. The internet on the other hand does not have a programming structure; the internet provides a new kind of continuous flow. The whole beginning-middle-end conception is inoperative. Virtual events are not predefined, nothing is decided in advance, and the users themselves are shaping the events as they happen. This may be one of the causes of that major discrepancy between the real and the virtual in cases of children, who in the Eastern-European region have an unhealthy usage of digital devices at a young age. Making theater performances for them is challenging.

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[64] In July 2023 the number of regular Facebook users (daily access) reached 2 billion users, the total number of users being 3 billion. (Information provided online by Meta company.)

[65] There are of course exceptions, like for example the French film director Jean-Luc Godard, who focused on breaking up this conception of time. When asked in the 60s during a public debate by a reporter: "Even you have to accept the fact Mr. Godard, that a film needs to have a beginning, middle and an end." – Godard replied: "You are right, but they don't have to be necessarily in this order." (Lehmann 2007)

> *Specifically, screen time and social media use among kids and teens have been linked with an increased prevalence of mental health concerns. The effects of technology on children and teens can have an impact on social skills, their development and can be linked to a number of other subsequent factors. Research has indicated that internet addiction, particularly among younger demographics such as teenagers, is becoming a widespread issue.* (Children's Bureau, Southern California 2019)

Returning to the example of the Facebook platform, the front page is a "news feed," a constantly refreshing display of what is going on with our friends[66]. This feature also gives the exact time they've shared information, whether a status or location update, a meme, a piece of media, a comment on a thread, etc. This may be a cause of that great curiosity that surrounds the whole Facebook-event: the power of knowing what happened[67]. Westlake quotes a few user opinions in her study, and one of the Facebook users admits that Facebook can cause dependency, and that he himself became an addicted user of the platform. "Facebook is addictive and sometimes I find myself looking at random profiles, while I have a million constructive things to do." Another user says: "Facebook is like crack; I check it every damn day even if I know there is absolutely no good reason to." (Westlake 2008, 31)

I posted a question[68] on my Facebook profile wall, and asked all my Facebook friends to express their opinion on the topic: "In search for your opinions: Can Facebook be addictive?" According to most of the commenters, addiction

[66] We must also note the change of meaning to the word: friend. As it became a Facebook term, its ethical value decreased drastically.
[67] The only real event happening is in fact an individual sitting down in front of a computer and pushing a button.
[68] On December 4th, 2009

is possible, but they did not consider themselves addicted. Two users said there is a strong possibility of getting addicted to it, that's why they only check their profiles once or twice a week. "I am sure Facebook can be addictive. I don't think that I am addicted though. I only visit the page about twice a week. But I sure would miss it if I was not able to use the page anymore since I like the thing about being updated on people's lives."[69]

Every reply to my inquiry mentioned how positive Facebook can be. Users can satisfy their curiosity and find out as much as possible about a lot of people without having to schedule a meeting over the phone or in-person. Facebook does allow us to contact other users directly through private messaging, but all other activities are public and can be looked up in the archives: who wrote what to whom, who knows who, who likes what, who completed what kind of test and with what results, etc. We don't have to sit on a bench in a park or look out our window to see what goes on outside our private space. Facebook and other social networks can satisfy innate human curiosity remotely.

We should mention beyond the factor of curiosity that because in the world of the virtual the sudden and the unexpected can be repeated or can be started from the beginning, just think of trolling for example. The responsibility for one's acts is significantly reduced compared to that of real-life situations, even the consequences can be defined and customized by the user from the safety of a desktop seat (a badly intentioned comment can be deleted and untracked for example).

Satisfying All Our Curiosities: the Internet

Looking out our window or sitting on a park bench we gather information about people from the way they are dressed, the way they walk, their body language, and

[69] Posted on 4th of December 2009, 11:37 PM

conversations we overhear. The information we get using Facebook is seemingly deeper, since people also fill us in on their emotional and intellectual activities. But what we get is not 3D information, only 2D. Curiosity is more of the essence here than real understanding of the information provided. Lehmann likewise points out that for today's theater viewer, the formulation of questions is more important than the answers themselves. The members of a theater audience and the internet users have the same kind of interest here. According to Lehmann, postdramatic theater deconstructs logical, Aristotelian perception, because the theater does not aspire to give the audience what they expect or already know. Theater is rather a way of reflecting on the ways in which reality challenges, resists, or undermines our perception of it, as reality can be violently counterintuitive or unpleasant at times. (Lehmann 2007)

Avatars

We all leave our marks on our ways of communication. In earlier times we could be recognized by our handwriting or the sound of our voice, today we have digital IDs, profiles, or avatars[70]. The significant difference is that our personalized digital marks are already prepared for us. These are unique and personalized in a way but were still prepared by a programmer who came up with the format or set the parameters of personalization.

The word "avatar" originally refers to the material incarnation of a deity[71]. In internet slang it means a virtual alter-ego that possesses a name, an outlook, and attributes assembled

[70] These applications make it possible to create a virtual identity for us. These identities then make it possible for others to recognize us on the web and be more reachable. (One can customize name, outlook, pictures, characteristics, clothes, etc.)

[71] Avatar is a Sanskrit word, meaning "descent, embodiment, incarnation."

by the user[72]. Avatars, depending on their construction, environment, and usage, may be used to produce a likeness of the user or as a digital disguise. They facilitate a kind of virtual role-playing process that resembles the character-building process in the theater, though with one crucial difference: the avatar is constantly watched and controlled from outside, via a digital interface, rather than embodied by the user (though augmented and immersive virtual reality tools like the Oculus Rift headset indicate that digital interfaces are moving toward more embodied methods of avatar control). The identification of the two characters is visual but it does not happen at a psychological and physiological level. The avatar "stands in" for the user in a digital environment as an icon that expresses the user's persona. Theater, on the other hand, provides time and space among other people, in community, where individuality and collectivism can be experienced in proximity.

Exercise: This exercise should be used in groups, where the actors, students are already in a working relationship and know each other well. During this exercise contents of the deeper unconscious may surface, and these can be surprising. It may be useful to use different masks, but it can be the same mask on every person too. The

[72] In the online strategy game World of Warcraft, for instance, players step inside the world as virtual characters who can talk to other players in the virtual world via a curated avatar. They can select their race of creature, their clothing and personal effects, and their skills and special powers. Yahoo Messenger also offers the possibility to create a profile with an avatar's whose outfit, clothing, hairstyle, etc. can be continuously updated and changed. Facebook's Metaverse, which has been released in a beta version, has created an immersive platform that straddles social media and RPG gaming in its use of avatars. One can travel through various digital landscapes, hold virtual business meetings with avatars, go to virtual concerts, play mini-games with others, or even try open-mic comedy.

exercise will function differently if we use masks covering the entire face of the participants or if we use masks covering only half of their faces. It is advised to start with masks that cover the entire face. A maximum of five people take part in the exercise, the rest of the group is watching. The procedure of the exercise:
The person doing the exercise sits in a chair in front of a mirror. Observes his/her face in the mirror for a while. After this with closed eyes takes the mask in the hands and feels it with the fingers, discovers every small detail of the mask in hand. (It is advised not to see the mask in advance!) After performing this, with open eyes faces the mask and tries to express the masks expression with his or her face. Now the mask gets put on and the performer looks in the mirror again. The performer of the exercise studies the new mask face, takes the time to get to know it. The performer now gives a voice to this mask, then a character and gestures. When the performer feels ready, he or she will stand up from the chair alone, or helped by the group supervisor, the performer will walk and move, then greets the group watching the exercise. Talks to them, answers their questions if it is the case. During this time the supervisor of the exercise will periodically hold a smaller mirror in front of the performer, so he or she can see again the mask-face and can keep being in this state generated by the mask. When the performer signals that he or she wants to sit down and take the mask off do not force more time, end it right there.

> For the observers of this exercise, it is important to be constantly concentrated, not to disturb the performer, not to intervene.
> It might occur that the performers of this exercise start crying or hysterical laughing, do not get scared, it is a part of the process. It is of utmost importance not to force this exercise on anyone, if it becomes uncomfortable, let them step out immediately.

Theater incorporates the inventions of the digital era, uses these tools in the performances, and applies them in the creative process. But if theater creators are aware that only by incorporating these tools the problem of the "framing" discussed above is not solved, they can use the methods and variations of this incorporation to react to the realities of the media environment. In this case we are not talking about simple assimilation, but we are witnessing real reaction. It is certain that the all-time audience would digest more quickly simple assimilation, but it is not certain if this would be enough for theater. If a reaction happens, the viewer has a harder job processing is, the processing of the information through the senses and through emotions is not that clear anymore, the whole process cannot be supervised anymore, "success" is not guaranteed but the theater has asked a real question this way, it created a forum of thinking-together rather than giving a clear unambiguous answer. We should not try and force the ideological models of yesterday on the artistic practices of today. Let us not require theater to show us reality in a way we would like to see it. It is a mistake to evaluate theater from the side of the audience's expectations, since all audience members are shaped in their day to day lives by these dramatic structures and if they come to face the failure of drama in theater, they will surely hold

the artists accountable for it – lectured Professor Lehmann. (Lehmann 2007) Lehmann's advice in this context points out the problematic of assimilation-reaction once again and shows that theater-making as a reaction will not necessarily bring immediate success and in many cases viewers will first repulse all that is not easy to understand and recognize. Lehmann's words hit a more positive tone when he reminds us that this entire situation is not a problem at all: it is all a natural part of the theatrical process.

Final Thoughts

Since the appearance of the genre of drama, meaning the appearance of conscience on stage[73] the characters are in constant disharmony and trouble, "they are metaphorically ill". (Jákfalvi 2001, 18) The characters of contemporary drama cannot avoid this illness since their authors assume their imperfections, thus they act inconsequential and they are captives of frailty and caducity. Ionesco and Beckett go as far as to assume that their characters are made of loosely connected pieces.

After the First World War the diligence to isolate and point out identity was stopped. The Dadaist manifesto and movement reevaluated art and deconstructed everything down to the atoms to create a new world out of this nihil, without the objective of creating something new. Hugo Ball's poetry of nonsense, a language of mumblings (the poem "Gadji beri bimba" for example), deconstructed language to produce a space where the raw materials of sound and rhythm constituted poetry, rather than the referential meaning of the words. The plays of Tristan Tzara (his first and most well-known: *The Gas Heart* from 1921) not only disregard classical dramaturgy but are also free of the rules of character-building and dramatic action. The figures of the play (body parts: Liver, Heart, etc.) deliver incoherent, senseless dialogues. There is no accepted convention of situations in the play unless total chaos can be considered a situation. Looking at this from the problem of identity, we can state that the Dada maneuvered with non-identity, dismantling all definitions of the person, of the self.

[73] The history of theater considers Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* also known as *Nora* to mark the beginning of this genre. (Crișan 2004, 82-83)

Exercise: Take Tristan Tzara's Dadaist play, *The Gas Heart*, and distribute the characters within your group. After the first few pieces of dialogue, we must find intellectual meaning to each sentence spoken by the characters. Interpretation in performance can also count as meaning. Now read the text in different styles, keeping the same found meaning (the Dadaist play cannot be read as a realistic one): declamation, poem, commedia dell'arte, melodrama, song etc. This exercise can be used with other plays (not necessarily absurd or dada). The point is to use this process to distance ourselves from the text, discover new approaches when a scene or creative process has gotten stuck, or to have a fun, playful diversion to creatively diffuse tension in the rehearsal.

The Secession[74] (approximately between the years 1916-1930) has its roots in Expressionism and Symbolism, articulated the need for human values to be redefined, for the role of art to be redefined. As humanity destroyed its fundamental values, if not all, these needed rephrasing, rebuilding, and healing.

In the 1930s Artaud stated that words had become empty. In his *Theater of Cruelty*, there is no "escape," everything is sacrificed for salvation and purification. The audience does not attend this kind of theater for recreation or entertainment. Rather, the actor performs a ritual, emitting only indistinct speech and guttural sounds of the body, a cruelty which purifies. Samuel Beckett's plays are similarly inspired from the hopeless and faithless state of the post-war generation, which had no prospect for an optimistic future. His

[74] In French the term used is Art Nouveau.

characters don't have a past or a future, and in most cases, there isn't even a present for them. They are all lost in an empty space and time, they are in the present of the stage, but not in the reality of a fictional world created on stage. Jákfalvi concludes that speech in this dramatic situation loses its primary function to make every spoken word a piece of creation, a living, breathing creature. (Jákfalvi 2001, 16-18) The same is true of the texts of Ionesco and Pinter. The words of the character only express the characters obliquely, but do not reflect reality, neither in terms of space, time, nor plot. All these characters are created by the words that they speak, not by the situation we see on stage. In Pinter's milestone play *The Caretaker* (1960), Davis reinvents his identity with every new situation, sometimes even getting lost among his plural identities.

In the absurd plays of Ionesco, Beckett, and Pinter, we find static characters determined by the text that is given to them. They are not going anywhere, simply because they have nowhere to go, and they are motionless because this is how they can communicate. The creators of these texts are knowingly avoiding the Aristotelian description of mimesis. The text we hear and the plot (or anti-plot) we see are in disharmony. In contemporary German playwright Marius von Mayenburg's play, *Das Kalte Kind* (2002), we find stereotypical pieces of text, but the spoken words mean something other than their primary meaning. The communication between characters is in fact anti-communication: they talk to each other, but they don't communicate; they listen, but don't understand each other. In Botho Strauss' play *Die Zeit Und das Zimmer* (1995), the characters are present on stage through a distant image of their past and they can only be seen as references to themselves even if they are physically present on stage. I turn to the above-mentioned playwrights and their texts to point out the conclusion at hand: contemporary dramatic literature and theatrical language expects a level of interpretation and understanding from the receiver

that is different from everyday communication. We understand the primary meaning of the words, their denotation is clear, yet the words and notions connect at a different level to the characters' thought structures. I would compare this to the illogical yet intuitive structures of dreams. This tendency is one modality of return to the primordial form of human existence through theater.

Though theater is constantly defining its role in society, the general geopolitical atmosphere of the present has similarities with the historical moments described above, in which theater (and art in general) had to find its purpose again. And because audiences since the pandemic are reluctant to return to the theater (though this tendency varies in the different regions of Europe) questions of purpose are even more urgent. Contemporary discourses around the issue of theater's mission are on the table in all internationally ranked theater journals; in applications for financial support (eg, Creative Europe and the Erasmus program) for cultural, artistic and education projects addressing burning themes like sustainability, ecology, equality, and inclusion; in the works and artistic attitudes of theatermakers (eg, performances addressing the discourse and gestures of sustainable artistic practices like green traveling or ecological set designs, etc.); and in the appearance of newer and newer performance genres that open the discourse..

The question of cultural identity not only addresses a person's cultural or sociological constitution as an individual affiliation, but how groups are differentiated by location, gender, race, history, nationality, or ethnic identity. The problems in engaging these issues of identity have been addressed in many disciplines in the modern era: sociology, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, cultural studies, religious studies, etc. Even if these disciplines approach the matter from their respective points of view, there is one general conclusion that they all agree on: the old identities that were holding the world in balance for so long are fading

away in the present. (Hall 1997) The whole of postmodern philosophy concludes that the self is not a stable entity or fixed essence, but a protean subjectivity that develops and shapeshifts under the influence of its discursive and ideological contexts. The concept of singular identities has been taken over by multiple identities, such that we can no longer speak about the oneness of an individual. The modern human being will step into a new identity according to the expectation of each role that society assigns them.

This phenomenon is to be seen in the evolutionary arc of theater science, playwriting, and theater making.

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